

**Made in Thailand.  
Thainess, Performance and Narration in  
Contemporary Thai Cinema**

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## 1. Introduction

On a journey to Thailand in 2002, a movie poster caught my attention. It advertised the Pang Brothers' *Khon hen phii* (*The Eye*, HK/TH 2002) and was all over Bangkok. By coincidence some days later, I saw the movie's trailer. Like the poster, it looked sophisticated and sleekly up-to-date. Its polished aesthetics and production standard reminded me of Japanese horror films, and I realized this was a remarkable change from Thai film as I knew it, although that was, at the time, not very well.

Having grown up in Thailand in the mid-Seventies and early Eighties, I had vague memories of Thai cinema being present in the public space, but regarded as a somewhat questionable cultural product. Among my early movie experiences were Hollywood blockbusters such as Disney animations and Steven Spielberg's *E.T.*, shown in cinema halls, glimpses of period martial arts dramas from Hong Kong, screened outdoors, their soundscape audible from far away, and Thai films, advertised on huge, hand-painted billboards. The latter had a reputation for being notoriously soppy, cheaply produced and low-level entertainment, especially in comparison with imported films that were deemed more interesting.

Yet at that moment in 2002, Thai film suddenly seemed very visible and highly regarded. It was making its appearance in Thai movie theaters, on the international festival circuit and at times even in European cinema programmes. International screenings featured works by directors such as Wisit Sasanatieng, Pen-ek Ratanaruang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Pimpaka Towira. Various magazine articles I discovered on a development called the «Thai New Wave» echoed the impression that something significant was going on in Thai film. Indeed, the local film scene seemed to be blossoming, a significant discourse on local movies had sprung up in the media, and Mangpong, a large local home entertainment chain, even had «Thai film» sections in their stores. This upswing seemed to oppose the common view that all so-called developing countries are dominated by American film and television as a form of cultural colonialism.

Curious, I viewed whatever was accessible and was astonished at the broad range of genres and styles. There hardly seemed to be a common denominator of recent Thai film, save for its strong interest in self-representation: an obvious issue of the movies was their being Thai. This concern showed up in terms of subject matter as well as film style, and matched the resurgence of Thainess that gained prominence in local everyday culture from the mid-Nineties on.

The following chapter studies the emergence of Thai cinema after 1997 and its preoccupation with Thainess, examining historical developments behind this trend. It further inquires into the various ways in which Thainess expresses itself in film. Amidst the globalization of culture, the worldwide film industry has grown increasingly transnationalized in recent decades. This can be seen in the cultural production of nations, as well as in their understanding of themselves as producers of culture. Thai cinematic self-representation is strongly marked by the foreign spectatorship newly interested in Thai film and by the possibility of international marketability.

The next, and main, part focuses on the expression of Thainess in film form and narration by examining recurrent characteristic elements of narrative structure in mainstream film, drawing on descriptions and analysis of several sequences. To assess the background of this style, the text studies how Thai mainstream film refers back to traditional Thai performing arts and their understanding of narration. It also briefly inquires into how various cinematic styles, stemming from various cultures, have influenced Thai cinema in the course of its history, especially the strains of Hollywood, Hong Kong and India.

Chapter four synthesizes the results from the previous analyses, sketching a generalized aesthetics and poetology of contemporary Thai film and tracing as key characteristics its background in orality and performativity. Departing from here, the text discusses further the understanding of realism and representation in Thai cinema, placing this understanding in relation to the reception of Western cultural modernity, and asks how cinematic forms of the present express Thainess by reference to traditional modes of representation. To offset the description of mainstream film and to balance the picture,

the text concludes with a discussion of the ways independent productions negotiate Thainess, and analyses several films to this end.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes the text and provides an outlook for the state of Thai cinema at the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The body of work discussed here mainly consists of Thai mainstream film produced between 1997 and 2009. It also considers semi-independent films that are close to mainstream pop culture, referring to it and often ironizing it. These films combine financing by major production houses with independent financing at different stages of their production process. The choice to focus on this body of work was made for the reason that this work mirrors the taste of a wide audience and makes up the majority of contemporary Thai production, providing insight into the workings of mass culture. As previously mentioned, the text includes a cursory discussion of independent film as a complement, so as to reflect the wide range of productions that makes up contemporary Thai cinema.

### **Resources and Methodology**

When choosing sources on Thai film, the most obvious issue must be language. The language gap between Thai and foreign-language writing is a challenge to the exchange between the two fields of discourse. This situation is critical for foreign-language theory on Thai film: there is a danger of producing a foreign-language discourse that exists in a kind of bubble detached from the place it discusses, not only in terms of language, but also of theory and methods, by drawing solely on Western bodies of theory and philosophy and thus providing an inadequate way of framing and theorizing Thai film.

For this reason, I draw mainly from Thai authors writing in English, such as Kong Rithdee, Anchalee Chaiworaporn, Chalida Uabumrungjit, and May Adadol Ingawanit. When quoting non-Thai authors, I take care to rely on those influenced by Thai texts and thus not solely reproducing Western academic writing, but taking into account local discourse as well.

Journalism – foreign as well as Thai – has covered the developments in recent Thai film fairly well and even extensively at times. Because academic accounts are harder to find, journalistic texts play an important role in research.

While questions of film content and subject matter have been widely discussed, writing on the aesthetics, narratology and specific fictionality of Thai film hardly exists at the present time. To gain deeper insight into these fields, I had to move away from the field of film studies and supplement my research with alternative methods. An important key to a deepened understanding of dramaturgy and narrative codes was research on the classical arts in Thailand, especially dance, drama and theatre, but also literature. Here, texts by Mattani Moj dara Rutnin have been helpful. The work of Chetana Nagavajara, who operates on a comparatistic, transcultural line of thought, has proved inspiring as well.

Oral research is also important. Conversations with people involved in film, such as archivists, scholars, and directors, have helped fill the gap in written texts on Thai film. For the study of film sequences and their aesthetic and narrative characteristics, film analysis has provided a valuable tool to understanding which formal, aesthetic and technical parameters movies employ to tell stories, and what effect this generates. Further, poststructuralist film theory by authors such as David Bordwell, Sarah Kozloff and Seymour Chatman helps reflect on the narratological causes and effects of the analysed film style.

At the same time, this text is an exploration of recent Thai cinema since the mid-1990s, an inquiry into the Thai concept of narration and fiction as a cultural phenomenon, and a reflection on the meaning and implications of the notion of national culture. By way of theory, it is an exercise in transcultural perspective.

It is not, however, a detailed attempt to cover Thai film history, nor an exhaustive definition of what recent Thai film consists of.

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## 2. Contemporary Thai Film and Its Role as National Cinema

This chapter seeks to trace the development of Thai cinema from the mid-1990s to the present day and to examine its socioeconomic background, while focusing on the concept of Thainess – what this means shall be discussed in the course of this text – and its significance for the era of the late 1990s when Thai cinema experienced major changes. As a concept with a long history, Thainess expresses a sense of national belonging that can clearly be made out in recent film productions, in story content as well as in certain motifs and subject matters. This chapter will look at some ways in which Thainess manifests itself, then contrast it with the foreign gaze and Thai films' discursive reactions to it that form a kind of deconstructive, ironic Thainess which might be seen as a reflection on nationalism.

A new issue in recent Thai film is its changing self-concept, evolving from that of a product conceived solely for the home market to that of an export item. As Thai cinema enters the festival circuit and aspires to international sales, it faces a new, foreign audience to which it wishes to appeal in addition to the Thai audience. This double orientation puts Thai cinema in a position that, at times, leads to cultural tensions that are evident in the films and turns them into texts with meanings that fluctuate transnationally. Some of the films create multiple layers of meaning, adapting to the varying cultural backgrounds of their audiences, while others inspect their attitude toward their cultural heritage, interpreting it in contemporary ways.

### 2.1 Post-1997 Developments in Thai Cinema

In the year 1997, *Fun Bar Karaoke* (Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 1997), a film portraying episodes in the enmeshed lives of various people living in present-day Bangkok, was screened at the Berlinale, was well-received and toured international festivals. The film was much talked about in Thailand, although it did not enjoy great box office success. In the same year, a key film turned into a surprise hit in Thailand: *2499 Antapan Krong Muang* (*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters*, Nonzee Nimibutr, 1997) broke the Thai box office record, earning 75 million baht in five months (Anchalee, 1997(2)). While this



was partly due to its production's closeness to Hollywood standards, another factor was probably its subject matter, the life of a local historical character from *nak leng* (gangster) subculture, displayed in a controversial way. The director's next film, *Nang Nak* (1999), became an even bigger hit and outgrossed the worldwide blockbuster *Titanic* (James Cameron, USA 1997) at the Thai box office.<sup>1</sup>

Soon after, *Fah talai Jone* (*Tears of the Black Tiger*, Wisit Sasanatieng, 2000) won the main award at the Vancouver International Film Festival and was, in 2001, the first Thai film ever screened at Cannes, where it received critical acclaim. The number of films produced annually in Thailand increased steadily over the years, from under ten in 1990 to roughly a dozen in 2000 and 2001, reaching about 50 in 2006.<sup>2</sup> While the majority of films released were Hollywood movies, domestic films performed astonishingly well, approaching a 30% market share in 2001 for the first time in two decades (Anchalee 2002). The Thai and the international press both responded euphorically to this string of successes, seeing it as a sign of Thai movies gaining access to international exposure. Many articles on recent developments in Thai film appeared in film journals and culture sections of international newspapers, often labeling it the «Thai New Wave» or the «Renaissance of Thai film» and using rather melodramatic jargon to imply the return of national film culture (Farmer 2008).

While it might be too much to claim that there was suddenly a clear-cut New Wave movement, the new activity in production certainly was remarkable and gained momentum over the following years. A crucial change lay in the emergence of a new mode of semi-independent production: whereas Thai film production had been monopolized by major entertainment companies until the mid-1990s, a new branch of productions emerged from 1997 on that worked independently until the postproduction stage, then relied on distribution to movie theaters and DVD production by majors (Sudarat 2007). This so-called «New Thai Cinema» was created by directors like Wisit

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<sup>1</sup> According to Williamson 2005/1, it made 150 million baht and was produced on a 12 million budget.

<sup>2</sup> See Kong 2002 and 2005, and Anchalee 2002. According to Rachada 2004, in 2000 and 2001, 12 Thai films were released, in 2002, 23, and in 2003, over 50. The exact figures vary slightly between sources.

Sasanatieng, Nonzee Nimibutr, Pen-ek Ratanaruang, Yongyooth Thongkonthool and Jira Maligool who had previously worked in the advertising and music video industry.

One of the notable effects of the new movies was to gradually bring Thai people back into Thai movies, shifting audience segments from teenagers toward the inclusion of a more mature, diverse, educated audience. In the development of a more vital film culture, many parallel activities emerged simultaneously, adding possibilities for interrelations between people active in the field, both Thai and foreign. Film schools saw more students enrolling. New film magazines, such as *Bioscope*, and websites were created; local media coverage of the film scene greatly increased.<sup>3</sup> The National Film Archive has been granted a new space with improved working conditions and a small museum. Cultural institutions offer more opportunities for audiences to view non-mainstream films. Various festivals were founded, perhaps most importantly the Short Film Festival hosted by the Thai Film Foundation, which provides an important annual venue for young alternative filmmakers. These festivals have established a totally new short and independent film scene (Chalida 2004). In general, there was a boost that led to a broad revival of film culture, both mainstream and alternative, foreign and domestic, providing a fruitful context for the upswing of local film production and its slow but steady rise since 1997 (Anchalee / Knee 2006, 60).

The euphoria about this upswing might be better understood in view of the historical background. The prior creative phase in Thai cinema had taken place in the mid-1970s, when Thailand produced a number of films concerned with social criticism that were viewed abroad as well. This wave, however, soon came to an end under a restrictive government. Hollywood blockbusters took over and monopolized the market in the 1980s. Few local films were made. They were produced on very low budgets and were of poor quality, following the generic outlines and conventions of popular Thai genres such as the ghost movie, the transvestite comedy, action and teenager romantic melodrama. They were strongly formulaic, being mass products designed mainly for lower-income,

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<sup>3</sup> On *Bioscope* Magazine and writing about film, see Thunskas 2006 for an interview with its editors.

rural and teen audiences.<sup>4</sup> This gave them the status of low-class entertainment, culturally, economically and technically inferior compared to the more glamorous imports from the USA, Europe and Hong Kong. The conventional view was that Thai movies were mainly watched by working-class audiences. Internationally, these films were not viewed at all; seen from outside the country, Thai film seemed virtually nonexistent.<sup>5</sup> In Thailand, local productions were unflatteringly called *nam nao* (murky, putrid water) because of their lack of depth, stagnant plots and unappealing reputation. The low creativity and repetitive film form were also due to the rigid, stagnant structure of the film industry. The production monopoly was shared by a few major companies, large entertainment conglomerates that linked the film and music industry, drawing on a local star system that made up an important selling point of music and film. As no state subsidy for film production or film culture existed, hardly any independent films were made. Film emphatically was understood as entertainment rather than art, and produced as a quick and cheap consumer item.

In this context, it is hardly surprising that the successful new films were met with great enthusiasm and triggered many new productions, some of which were just as well received. The range of subjects was suddenly enlarged. Recent Thai film features many different genres and genre hybrids – reviving Thai genres, using foreign ones and mixing them into crossover forms – and uses widely varying film styles, from the slick aesthetics of advertisements to grainy images in independent films reminiscent of *cinéma vérité*. New modes of production have emerged: alongside mainstream films developed by the commercial major studio system, semi-independent films have sprung up. These movies are independently or semi-independently produced and later distributed by majors. Independent films, on the other hand, are produced entirely outside the studio system.

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that feature film production has actually dropped significantly since 1997. The «New Wave» has in fact coincided with a decrease of production, but a blossoming of talent, production standards and quality. See Anchalee, *Contemporary Thai Cinema*, undated.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed overview of Thai film history, see Boonrak 1992 and Anchalee 2001.

While most of the films are fictional, documentaries and experimental films are made as well. Feature films stand alongside shorts; theatrical releases share the market with telemovies, a direct-to-video format that suddenly became highly popular in the late 1990s.<sup>6</sup> The artistic heterogeneity is due to the emergence of young, unknown directors. Many of them have a background in advertising or music videos, while others were educated at film or art schools, in Thailand or abroad. At the same time, several established directors, such as Bandit Rittakol and Euthana Mukdasanit, have returned to filmmaking after having been sidelined by the dominance of B pictures. This diversity makes the country's production hard to classify at first glance, especially in comparison to the aforementioned Thai «New Wave» of the early 1970s or other movements like the French Nouvelle Vague, Italian Neorealism or Danish Dogma films, all of which are more homogeneous in style, background and ideology. Film critic Anchalee Chaiworaporn even identifies diversity as a distinctive feature of recent Thai film (Anchalee, *New Thai Cinema*, 2006).

### **Transnationality**

Perhaps the most striking new aspect of the development in recent Thai cinema is its transnationality. While higher production values were one reason for the sudden popularity of local films, an equally important reason seemed to be their newly acquired international visibility and the fact that they had gone abroad and met with approval, sometimes even garnering awards.

These transnational careers were all the more remarkable as Thai production had, up till then, hardly ever crossed the country's borders. While influences from outside had always been apparent and met with interest, the cultural flow had remained largely one-directional. Only a few particular films had travelled abroad to be screened to foreign audiences; during the so-called first Thai New Wave during the years 1973-1976, there had been a brief spell of international reception when some films were invited to European film festivals, such as *Plae kao* (*The Old Scar*, Cherd Songsri, 1977), or, later on, *Peesua lae dokmai* (*Butterfly and Flower*, Euthana Mukdasanit, 1985). For reasons of

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on the telemovie format, see Anchalee/Knee 2006, 67.

language, and since the large mass of the mainstream followed unchanging formulas catering to rural or lower-class Thai audiences, their export was not considered an option. Some local productions found their way abroad as VHS or DVD copies; however, they were almost exclusively received by diaspora audiences.

Thus, the turn of events from 1997 onwards brought a substantial shift in the local film world's self-perception. The recognition from outside the country generated an immense sense of self-esteem. Success abroad, especially in the first-world regions of Europe and the USA, has a long tradition of being perceived as prestigious, elevating the meaning of national culture beyond the nation's boundaries and strongly affirming it.

This uplift of esteem entailed further transnational developments of the Thai film industry, such as the export of theatrical and DVD distribution rights to US and European markets. An important novelty for Thai film was the beginning of its worldwide distribution. After the Cannes screening of *Tears of the Black Tiger*, film major Miramax acquired the US distribution rights. *Ruang talok 69 (Sixty-nine)* (Pen-ek Ratanarung, 1999) and *Nang Nak* (Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999) were the first Thai movies to draw attention from Dutch-based Fortissimo Film Sales, a leading sales agent of Asian cinema (Stephens 2001; Anchalee / Knee 2006, 68). Since then, several productions have been bought by international distributors, perhaps most famously *Satree Lek (Iron Ladies)* (2000) and *Ong-Bak* (Prachya Pinkaew, 2003).

The novel experience of being marketable to foreign audiences has fuelled interest in coproductions. As foreign production companies, funds and distributors become aware of the growing market value of Thai films, bids rise and numerous new projects are planned transnationally, opening up expanded financial possibilities for Thai filmmakers. Lately, the Thai industry has coproduced with Hong Kong, Singapore and Europe to an unprecedented extent.

Reaching out beyond the Thai market has proved crucial to film projects, as it is the key to international visibility as well as to commercial value in the global market. In fact, the fate of recent Thai films has been strongly linked to their presence at international festivals, as it is there that they become visible and marketable to a wider audience. Since 1997, Thai movies have been screened at major film festivals such as Cannes, Venice and Berlin. This growing internationality has altered Thailand's image of its own film

industry. It is increasingly seen not as a notorious dead end, but as a business to be taken seriously, offering opportunities that might actually be profitable.

The exposure to the international film circuit has left traces: as filmmakers, film students, scholars and journalists go abroad to attend festivals and conferences, they bring home foreign influences, inspirations and know-how that might find their way into new productions. Many filmmakers of the younger generation have spent a substantial period of time abroad, attending art or film school in the USA or Europe and thus becoming accustomed to foreign ways of life, international production standards as well as the conventions of the international film business. Transnationality becomes an aspect of growing importance in artistic careers. In fact, it is perhaps no coincidence that the beginning of the new developments in Thai film was itself fuelled by factors linked with transnationality: a rise in production values inspired by the standards of advertising, themselves modelled on international high-end advertising style; the fact that several filmmakers had been educated and had gained work experience in the USA and Europe, and, importantly, the rise of consumer culture, adapted from industrialized countries, and the expansion of cineplex culture (Farmer 2008).

The increasing transnationality of the global cultural flow is a general development. As worldwide travel, mobility, and labor migration increase, a growing part of the world population becomes exposed to foreign cultural products. These products are strongly influenced for their part by transnational movements, integrating and transculturalizing experiences of the foreign.

In the US film industry, transnationalization has gained momentum since the 1950s and 1960s, as newly formed large US entertainment corporations began to expand their foreign markets. This growing international orientation of the American film industry, encouraged by government and industry leaders, continued through the 1960s and 1970s and aimed to maximize profits by additional showings: Once the costs of production had been recouped, usually within the domestic market, further showings in cities throughout the world produce revenues that are almost all profit (Buck 1992, 117). During the 1970s and 1980s, mergers resulted in large multinational corporations combining film,

television, cable, video, commercials and the like. This led to a transnationalization of all stages of production; apart from cinema distribution, television sales and video/DVD sales have gained in importance in foreign countries.

This entails rapid changes in the dynamics of the film industry. Products designed with international marketability in mind are increasingly rooted, financially and creatively, across multiple countries so as to maximize interest and appeal to a diverse audience. The end of the 1980s coincided with the buzzword of global cinema, « ... where any single film may have stars, producers, a director, scriptwriters, and financing from various countries, all aimed at a global cinema audience of two hundred million people» (Buck 1992, 122). Although the dominance of US cinema is uncontested on the world market, the recent tendency towards global cinema shifts the attention of the industry and viewers alike to cinemas of other countries. As foreign influences become popular in Hollywood film, mainstream audiences become aware of so-called world cinema as an alternative. The newfound interest might cause a rise in the esteem of non-US cinemas. At the same time, these cinema industries are becoming increasingly aware of the role of transnationality in the global film industry, aiming to take part in it.

The transnationalization of cinema, brought forth through economic forces, entails changing cultural practices: just as the appearances of movies shift, so does the understanding of the national self and its relation to the Other. Seeing culture as a «contingent scheme of meanings tied to power dynamics» means that cultural practices are embedded in strategies of positioning, control and maneuver: culture-making is linked to processes of reconfiguration of culture and identity (Ong 1999). Thus, as Thai movies aim for foreign markets, the issue of Thainess and its various interpretations shift in meaning. Whereas Thainess previously spoke solely to domestic viewers in a nationalist context, it will presumably not be understood in the same way when presented to non-Thai audiences. Production companies explore new contents and aesthetics, wishing to cater to the taste of foreign audiences. The prospect of selling Thai movies abroad, encouraged by surging interest in Asian cinemas since the mid-nineties, has induced rapid reconfigurations of the nation's self-image. All the while, the tendencies of transnationalization are obviously contradictory to the classical notion of national culture

and national cinema. In between these two concepts are newly forming territories, open to fruitful, novel transgressions and simultaneously prone to perplexing tensions, inconsistencies, and cultural misunderstandings, as shall be pointed out later on in this text.

## Outlook

Tracking the development of the upswing until the present day, over a decade later, it can be said that the euphoria has died down somewhat. The rush and excitement of moviemaking have been replaced by serious evaluations and down-to-earth efforts to establish a solid industry aiming to achieve sustained profits, as well as to diversify this industry. While the cinematic mainstream shows higher production values nowadays than before the upswing, independent film is blossoming. After a long period of absence caused by the arrival of multiplex culture in the 1980s, several new independent production companies have emerged, such as *Kick the Machine*, co-founded by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, or *Extra Virgin*, co-founded by Pimpaka Towira. Film culture has firmly established itself, and festivals are being held regularly. Artistic as well as financial ambitions seem to have more concrete options than even one decade ago, when film and the media were regarded as a minor business. Directors from different walks of life, such as advertising, theater, and TV drama, aspire to gain access to the film industry. Moreover, women directors, such as Mingmongkol Sonakul, Pimpaka Towira and Surapong Pinijkhar, are entering the Thai film industry for the first time in its history.

As the novelty value fades, the fate of Thai film remains somewhat unclear. Will the industry maintain its newly found standard or revert back to churning out fast-lived schematic productions, relying on surefire formulas for quick money? Do the higher standards of production correspond to the films' substance? Will international relations and coproductions flourish or flop? Will the industry focus on foreign markets or aim to entertain its home audience? Certain filmmakers are now regarded internationally as auteurs and are received more widely abroad, such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who served as a member of the jury at the Cannes Film Festival 2008 while grappling with



copyright issues in Thailand. Others, such as Pen-ek Ratanaruang or the Pang Brothers, are regarded as international directors, often working on the basis of transnational coproductions, rather than as Thai. Does their auteur status change the market's perception of them from Thai public figures to globally operating artists; and if so, does this perception discourage the notion and formation of a local film community, since it might motivate up-and-coming filmmakers to seek transnational audiences rather than local ones?

It is questionable whether the upswing carries on in the films' quality or whether the post-crisis optimism that has drawn many investors into the film business has transformed it into a mere vehicle for making profit. What can be said for sure, however, is that the Thai cinema upswing has restored Thailand's faith in its film industry and movies. It also has revived and diversified the industry and the cultural production, especially the field of independent and short film, and brought on a general shift in the scene's confidence.

### **The Economic Meltdown and the Resurgence of Thainess**

It is instructive to consider the effects of the late-1990s economic crisis in Thailand, one of the worst in the country's history, on its films. The year 1997 marked the peak of an economic crisis that expanded across Southeast Asia. Millions of employees were laid off. The baht, the national currency, was devalued on July 1, 1997, and a recession set in that compelled Thailand to seek assistance from the International Monetary Fund. Before this date, Thailand had been one of the most rapidly developing countries in the region, with the potential to join the ranks of Newly Industrialized Countries such as South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. The booming economy was based on a policy of dependency on foreign money – investment from abroad boosted the stock market, land prices, and job opportunities for white-collar workers. Globalization was a buzzword until the bubble burst.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the economy crash, see Pasuk/Baker 1998.

In the context of the crash, *khwam pen Thai*, usually translated as «Thainess», became a vigorous ideology, leaving its mark on economic as well as cultural developments.

*Khawm pen Thai* might be described as a strong awareness of one's identity as a citizen of the Thai state and of one's origins as firmly rooted in Thai culture. It also denotes imagined characteristics of the nation's citizens as a whole.

As life got harder, Thailand redirected its orientation from an imagined generic West back towards an imagined specific Thailand. There was a strong economic, social and cultural trend of rediscovering the country's own history, local knowledge and cultural roots, an ideology that fed on the distrust of the West that had arisen from the hardship brought on by the economic breakdown of the country. Values perceived as «Western», especially consumerism, belief in progress and in constant innovation, were now viewed with scepticism, and there was a widespread need for native, reliable values that could sustain the country, its wellbeing and its identity in the long run. In a widely heard speech, the king praised the importance of «moderate living», encouraging the Thai people to watch their spending and live a simpler, less materialistic life. The government also promoted the ideal of a self-sufficient economy, based on the culture of past times and depending less on foreign monetary investment than on self-sustainability (Anchalee 2006, 153). The ideology of «going back to Thai roots» resonated in every aspect of Thai life, with many people selling superfluous possessions to get by and leaving the cities to return to their hometowns for a simpler life.

Before long, the popularity of the term «Thainess» became a trend, a slogan comparable to a brand name – products like «real Thai coffee» or «old style noodles» appeared, often featuring the attribute *boran* (ancient, indigenous). There was a revival in ancient Thai medicine and healing massage; retro forms of popular culture such as old comic books, magazines or pop songs from the 1980s came back into fashion, and newly produced furniture was styled to look antique. Nostalgia caused all these products to sell well, in stark contrast to the ideals of self-sufficiency, simplicity and modesty that had lent Thainess credibility in the first place, Thainess itself became a highly popular item for consumption (Reynolds 2002, 311). The commodification of Thainess, linked to the rise of middle class consumer power from the mid-1980s on, entailed an alienation of the

Thai people from what was asserted to be their national identity. Kasian Tejapira has criticized this as follows:

Thainess has been ripped away from its traditional social contexts, deprived of its aura and turned into a free-floating signifier, which can then be commodified by goods of any nationality or origin. (...) These commodified forms have changed Thainess willy-nilly into one identity option among many others in the free market of a limitless plurality of significations, in the same sense that Coke is just one option among many other brands of cola, Singha Beer is just one option among many other brands of beer, and so on. In the process, Thainess has become, among Chineseness, Europeanness, Englishness, and so forth, another choice among a variety of national/ethnic signifiers to be worn or shed according to the changing circumstances. (Kasian 2001, 163)

### **Thainess, State Representation and Censorship**

The concept of Thainess is, however, not an invention of the mid-Nineties economy crisis. As Thongchai Winichakul wrote several years before the crash:

In Thailand today there is a widespread assumption that there is such a thing as a common Thai nature or identity: *khwampenthai* (Thainess). It is believed to have existed for a long time, and all Thai are supposed to be well aware of its virtue. The essence of Thainess has been well preserved up to the present time despite the fact that Siam has been transformed greatly toward modernization in the past hundred years. Like other nationalist discourse, it presumes that the great leaders (in this case monarchs) selectively adopted only good things from the West for the country while preserving the traditional values at their best. (Thongchai 1994, 3)

Although the discourse of Thainess has a long history, there has hardly ever been a single, clear definition of what it consists of. Kasian Tejapira describes the imaginary construct of Thainess as follows:

(...) recognizable imaginary characteristics of Thainess, constructed out of the official nationalist ethno-ideology sponsored by the state, (include):

1. The Thai nation as a harmonious village (national) community.
2. The state as an organic outgrowth of traditional hierarchy from family to community to nation.
3. Vigilance against «the political and ideological other» and «outsiders» arbitrarily misrepresented in racial or ethnic terms as «un-Thai».
4. Deflection of the origin of social problems to the level of personal morality.
5. Thainess is culturally unique.
6. Buddhism as the national religion.

Try as the state may, Thai national identity never settles into a homogenous and unproblematic whole for the average people. In practice, what is regarded as Thai identity is more likely to be a ghostly mesmerizing by one or more of these characteristics. (Kasian 2001, 156)

«Thai» in this context refers to the Thai ethnic group that has been discursively modelled as the ethnic and cultural predecessors of present-day Thailand since its formation as a modern nation-state in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> This discourse draws on a myth of origin, neglecting the presence of other ethnic groups in the same territory.

Thainess has been discursively claimed and instrumentalized by various ideological camps, and described by varying definitions, characteristics and manifestations, the major ones being the education system, the Thai language, the monarchy and Buddhism.

However, Thainess is a relatively recent appearance in Thai history. Up to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Thailand's predecessors, the kingdom of Ayutthaya and later early Bangkok, were an amorphous, multi-ethnic city-state, ruled by local and regional rulers and increasing and decreasing in power and expanding or contracting in geography, with fluid borders. Its inhabitants consisted of the Thai, who settled in the lowland kingdoms around Bangkok; the Lao in the northeast towards the Mekong; dispersed Mon and Khmer groups, as well as Chinese merchants and migrants; Malays and *chao leh*, sea gypsies, in the south; and in the north, tribes migrating from the Yunnan and Shan states. The exceptional ethnic diversity accounted for a multilingual, multicultural society, in which the primary distinction between social groups was not ethnicity, but their area of settlement and their degree of urbanism. It was only in the mid-1800s that King Rama IV (1851-68) defined the country as a state named Siam (Renard 2006, 300).

His successor, King Rama V or King Chulalongkorn, stood in close contact with Europe, and under this influence, the concept of the nation first appeared during his reign, along with *prathet chat*, a new word referring to the nation-state that had formerly signified the concept of clan, thus evolving from an ancient social concept to a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century notion of political organization (Thongchai 1994, 162). Also, the term *Thai* began to circulate. Modelled on the word *tai* that referred to the elite group of the kingdom with higher

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<sup>8</sup> As such, the term Thainess refers back to a time before Thailand actually existed. However, this is the common term generally used; no term for «Siamness» or «khwampensayam» has yet been introduced (Thongchai 1994, 19).

citizen status, it came to mean the citizens of the newly forming nation-state. However, during his reign King Chulalongkorn maintained the traditional non-ethnic form of social organization and was concerned with the integration of foreigners into the kingdom (Renard 2006, 306ff.).

Substantial changes took place during the reign of King Rama VI (King Vajiravudh, 1910-1925). A decade of studies spent in Europe around the turn of century had accustomed him to the concept of race as well as the ideology of progress, modernity and strong nationalism that was a driving force in European political and intellectual life at the time. Upon his return, the country received a makeover in the name of Western ideologies, following the model of European nation-states (Renard 2006, 308ff.). A national language was established, based on upper-class Thai; thus, language became an important ethnic indicator. Formal citizenship laws and procedures were introduced, as well as a new legal system. The newly founded Ministry of Public Instruction (1889) was appointed with the introduction of a standardized educational system, in which social studies would be a part of the curriculum throughout the whole compulsory schooling period and focus strongly on the role of the citizen as dutiful, obedient inhabitant of the nation (Mulder 2003, 192). An early course in character development teaches Thai civil behaviour and Buddhist comportment, stressing the moral construction of society and constructing the nation as large family structured by hierarchy, obligations and loyalty, with common welfare as the imperative. There is a strong consensus that Thai traditions, customs, and culture are to be appreciated and conserved, especially in the face of the increasing modernization brought about by the adaptation to Western ideologies of progress and economic development (Mulder 2003, 199). Ideology is strongly emphasized, one of the set purposes of primary education the instillation in pupils of a sense of pride in being Thai (Mulder 1997, 27).

Through these various top-down orders reforming the state as a modern nation, a new Thai identity was artificially defined, and the traditional way of life and understanding of the state became irrelevant, alienating its population. The stricter delineation of state borders, enforced centralization and bureaucratization entailed an artificial homogenization of the ethnically diverse nation, and the marginalization of non-ethnic

Thais, especially the Chinese and other minority groups, led to repression and legal discrimination against them. King Vajiravudh and his entourage enhanced nationalism by creating modern symbols of nationhood such as public ceremonies and holidays, monuments and a national flag. Within a short time, Thainess became an instrument of political power and authoritarian state control, firmly rooted in a constructed nationhood. While the question «What is Thai?» may be hard to define clearly, the domain of what is «un-Thai» is sometimes set rather rigidly. By delimiting the Other, Thainess discursively forms itself via negative identification: Once un-Thainess can be identified, its opposite, Thainess, is apparent (Thongchai 1994, 5). In the course of history, the position of the Other has been given to colonial powers, communism, minorities and Thailand's neighbouring countries, especially Myanmar and the Khmer regions (Renard 2006).

The novelty of the post-1997 rekindling of Thainess lies in its close connection with capitalism and consumerism, its commodification: it refuses materialism as a Western value, while at the same time becoming a sort of label for consumer goods. In this way, Thainess seems to be an attribute that can be readily manufactured – or counterfeited – at any time and anywhere in the world, similar to a brand-name knockoff, a fact that calls into question the authenticity of this «Thai culture» (Reynolds 2002, 312).

Today more than ever, Thainess has a strong visual presence, conveyed through public images and symbols such as flags, monuments, and the twice-daily television broadcasting of the national anthem or, especially, portraits of the king and the Thai royal family. Royalism and patriotism go hand in hand; this connection goes back to the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910-1925), who coined the maxim *chat, satsana, phramahakasat* (nation, religion, monarchy), meaning the three pillars that form the base of Thailand, then called Siam. The king is portrayed as the ideal Buddhist and the highly respected Father of the Nation; as such, he is at the heart and core of Thainess. His imagery – portraits, seals, banners – and its worship pervade the public sphere, adapting the status of icons and creating a visual omnipresence. Thai citizens everywhere are familiar with the repertoire of royal images depicting the king in uniform, as a youth, travelling abroad, greeting the public and so on.

In modern Thailand, images are crucial for the representation of the political, the nation and the state. There is an intense concern of Thai power with the diffusion, monitoring and control of visual imagery, surface appearance, and public behaviour, creating and reproducing a vast set of representations that shape the appearance and performance of Thai identity: to conform with public images and with ideals of the national is to perform citizenship and hence, a sense of belonging. To describe the key role of visual representation for Thai political power, Peter Jackson speaks of a «Thai regime of images» that is based on an episteme of appearances: essentialism is ascribed to surfaces and appearances, as opposed to most of Western epistemology, which dualistically views the appearance as apart from the real and the truth as hidden behind the surface:

In the modern West the simple accumulation of prestigious meanings around a representation is not sufficient to establish its validity. To demonstrate the validity of a representation one needs to establish a link to a principle of veracity. In classical Western epistemologies the philosophical task is to relate representations to extra-discursive «reality» by deploying a notion of truth value in order to distinguish valid statements from the invalid. In Western thought, historically guided by an intellectual ethic of truth above all, the prestige value of a statement depends on its truth value: untrue statements are denied status and only true statements have intellectual prestige. However, in the domain of public discourse under the Thai regime of images, the prestige value of an image may be independent of its truth value. (...) This is because the function of discourse within the episteme of images is to establish and enhance the prestige value of representations through processes of symbolic addition and association. (Jackson 2004(1), 205)

Jackson continues to conclude that the essentialism attributed to images corresponds to performativity as the core constitutive of modern Thai identity:

The surface-directed effects of the regime of images appear to imply that the symbolic surface of discursively constituted signs may move across but not necessarily reach into the core of being. In contrast to the confessional identity that Foucault presents as the model of modern Western subjectivities, we may perhaps postulate a performative identity as the pattern of modern Thai subjectivities. (Jackson 2004(1), 209)

The importance of images and performativity in the discursive forming of Thainess lends a special importance to film and visual media. Since the early penetration of the country

with mass media, it has been used by the state to disseminate nationalist ideology.<sup>9</sup> From its first introduction into Thailand, film has been connected to the power elite, used in representational ways with didactic intentions to portray Thailand as a modern state with a modern monarch. As Annette Hamilton points out, «from that time forward, one aspect of Thai filmmaking has been the representation of state-sanctioned and ideologically impelled versions of reality» (Hamilton 1994, 146).

Furthermore, the connection between cinema and nationalism is strongly present because the royal family has been active and influential in the development of Thai film since its early history. In 1897, King Chulalongkorn, who was making his first tour of Europe at the time, was filmed during his arrival in Berne, Switzerland. A few days later the film was shown to him before being screened throughout Switzerland and later catalogued by the Lumières. Prince Sanbassatra, who had accompanied the king on his journey, returned to Thailand with newly acquired filming equipment and stock, and soon made a series of short documentary-style films, most of them recording public activities of the king as well as royal ceremonies (Barmé 1999, 309). In the same year, French film companies introduced screenings to Thailand. After these initial encounters, Thai royalty developed a strong interest in the cinema and in filmmaking that continued during the reigns of later kings. Screenings were held for the public at festive occasions such as large temple festivals or the 1908 celebration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coronation of King Chulalongkorn (Barmé 1999, 311). The public held cinema in high regard, as Scot Barmé remarks:

Royal patronage of the cinema during this time was of particular significance in that it conferred film with a degree of prestige denied to other types of popular commercial entertainment (...). Elite distaste for these cultural forms was based on a feeling that they were too immediate, too recognisable and most importantly too identifiable with the lower orders, while the cinema, as an imported foreign form from the «civilized» world, was, in spite of its popular appeal, valued as embodying the mystique of modernity. (Barmé 1999, 312)

In 1922, two members of the royal family established the Royal Siamese Rail Film Unit, an institution that produced newsreels, documentaries on the activities of the king and his

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<sup>9</sup> By 1910, print media were common among the aristocracy and official classes; the first foreign films emerged during the same time with a powerful impact on a broader section of the population. See Hamilton 2002, 285.



government, as well as travelogue-type footage from provincial areas. These films were later screened in cinemas and represent the beginning of a new era in which the Thai state sought to promote its interests by visual means: for the first time, citizens everywhere could see images of faraway regions of their country. Film thereby helped to shape and define the growth of a national imagery, as well as the people's awareness of state institutions, like the Railway and the Film Unit, and their crucial role in creating a sense of national unity.

King Vajiravudh's successor, King Prajadhipok (1925-1935), an amateur filmmaker himself, officially opened theatres and issued policies to establish film culture in Thailand. He also had the 1930 Censorship Bill endorsed (Anchalee and Sorraditthep 2004).

After a coup d'état in 1932, Thailand changed from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. The newly established military regime under Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram strongly relied on film and broadcasting to spread nationalist ideology that remained connected with the public image of the royal family. In 1940, the Royal Air Force established the Film Department and concentrated on shooting propaganda films. Film has remained an important medium for conveying the presence of the king to the people, and increasingly so during the reign of the present monarch King Bhumiphol, because this era is marked by the rapid development of visual media. This is prominently visible during any screening in a Thai cinema: before the main film commences, a short film featuring the royal anthem is shown, during which audiences must stand up as a sign of respect.

Since the Monarchy is crucial to the concept of Thainess, a film that involves the Royal Family, be it in content, production, or both, automatically is of nationalistic significance. Even today, royals continue to be involved with the movie industry, producing and directing movies. A recent example is the epic *Suriyothai* (2001), directed by Prince Chatri Chalmr Yukol, funded by the queen, and presented as a grand elaboration of national myths.

Since visual media are of such high importance to the dispersion of nationalist ideology, it is not surprising that there is a strong state control of images, exercised through a rigid

copyright system which, by self-declaration, legitimizes itself by putting its acts in the service and in the name of Thainess, protecting the country from differing morals of so-called Western countries, and protecting society from moral and cultural decline (Kong 2007).

The Copyright Bill was endorsed by King Prajadiphok in 1930, towards the end of absolute monarchy and at a time when ideas about democracy and socialism began to be widely disseminated through the mass media. Theater owners and broadcasters must submit films before publicly screening them. The criteria for banning a film or cutting scenes include violating moral and cultural norms by depicting contents that might lead to certain habits or attitudes as well as the disturbance of public order and national security, insulting the Royal Family, the government and its officials, or by showing content that might weaken the people's trust in the administration of the country (Sakdina 1989, 60). The board of censors represents various government institutions. It is composed of members of the Ministries of Education, of University Affairs and of Foreign Affairs, the military, and the Department of Religious Affairs, a formation that reflects the hierarchic and rigid structure of a society in which the power elite has always been firmly linked with state power, military control and politics.

The copyright code is applied even today. The year 2008 has seen the endorsement of the New Film Act, which introduced a ratings system according to age groups; however, this Act works not instead of, but in addition to the copyright rules. Films, though subject to the rating, can still be cut or banned entirely. The members of the classification board are appointed by representatives of bureaucracy, forming a similar committee background to that of the copyright board. This reinforces the power of the state, especially the Ministry of Culture, which has become increasingly prominent in recent years through enforced attempts to «preserve Thai culture», disseminating conservative images of Thainess and censoring contradictions. The reason stated by authorities is, again, to protect Thai audiences from Un-Thainess, a declaration that backs up the myth of the state as a protective authority for the people (May 2009).

Prior to the endorsement, 2007 saw the formation of the Free Thai Cinema Movement that protested via a petition to the government. The movement was formed after the board

of censors had ordered Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Saeng Sattawat* (*Syndromes and a Century*, 2007) to be cut and, after the filmmaker's decision to cancel the film's commercial release in Thailand, refused to return the print. A widespread discussion ensued, and resulted in a protest movement, which could not, however, prevent the issuing of the Film Act.

As a substantial side effect of these strict sanctions, self-censorship has a long tradition. While one reason for this is the fear of charges of *lèse majesté*, self-censorship also has its roots in a social culture that is founded on hierarchic structures and respect towards those in higher positions than oneself.

These restrictions entail a culture of double readings, oral communication (for the reason of oral statements being more ephemeral and less traceable), and awareness of the unspoken. As Annette Hamilton points out:

The efficacy of state control over media may provide its own negations; the circulation of discourse may escape from the channels intended to control it. And, where the populace is well aware that the mass media and its messages are censored and controlled, this only provides an even more fertile ground for the proliferation of rumours, gossip, and the circulation of information, criticism and sometimes wild imaginings. In Thailand what is not said, the resounding silences, can open up fissures through which an unofficial discourse is constructed and rapidly circulated (Hamilton 2002, 280).

### **Independent Film**

Due to censorship and the public discourse of Thainess, subject matter such as politics, state bureaucracy, and direct critique of the nation are largely invisible from Thai mainstream film. The circulation of critical discourse sometimes implicitly appears in subcultural cinematic forms such as the independent and short film scene that work outside the major studio system. It has seen a remarkable growth during the last ten years, owing to a young generation of filmmakers attracted by the possibilities of artistic expression and of freedom to state opinions.<sup>10</sup> Independent filmmaking has become a

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<sup>10</sup> An interesting example is the summary report of the 2008 Bangkok Short Film Festival and its thematic programmes; see [http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2007/08/17/entertainment/entertainment\\_30045376.php](http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2007/08/17/entertainment/entertainment_30045376.php), retrieved August 2009.

realistic option, thanks to the affordability of modern cinematic technology, from DV cameras to home editing programmes (Sudarat 2007). Next to the mainstream and semi-independent cinema, it forms a third section of Thai film production, greatly differing from the other two regarding its avoidance of both formula and slick, advertising-influenced aesthetics. Its steady rise since the turn of the twenty-first century has caused observers to call it the «New New Thai Cinema».

While «Indie» has, in recent years, become a popular buzzword and has been proclaimed as the first step for young filmmakers to set foot in the industry, it is important to define the context of independent film as situating its participants outside a commercial system, hence marginalising their visibility for a wider audience segment and at the same time allowing them greater liberties in their statements and formal expression.<sup>11</sup> In Thailand, the main aspect of independent film is its independence from the major companies that monopolize the Thai entertainment industry. Instead, independent filmmakers depend on private funding, sponsors, award money and grants from international funds. Some filmmakers run their own production companies, such as Apichatpong's *Kick the Machine*, Mingmongkol's *Dedicate*, and *Extra Virgin*, founded by Pimpaka Towira, Ruengsang Sriporaya and Mai Meksawan. They produce and distribute independently, working outside the Thai apparatus of entertainment conglomerates and semi-independent production companies. As an example, the production of *Mysterious Object at Noon* relied on private funding, awards and grants, amongst others from the Hubert Bals Fund of the Netherlands. It followed a low-budget working practice, using volunteers and offering internships that followed the principle of learning by doing.

While independence from major entertainment conglomerates means dealing with economic and organisational challenges, it liberates expressive and artistic possibilities. Lower financial investments mean less pressure for box office return. This fact allows independent filmmakers to move beyond the necessity to appeal to mainstream audience

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<sup>11</sup> Alexis Tioseco states a similar context for independent cinema in the Philippines, concluding that «the challenge it now faces is to get the attention of the exhibitors so as to bring its works to the audience at large. It is only when this is accomplished, that we will see the true effects of this new cinema.» (Tioseco 2007, 302)

expectations and formulas, and it frees up a creativity often restricted by concessions to production companies and their target audiences.

Independent films often question the dominant rhetorics of nationhood, mostly indirectly through the construction of alternative images and aesthetics as well as the choice of otherwise evaded subject matter. As an example, in *Phom chue Chart* (*Lost Nation*, Zart Tancharoen, 2009), a Thai man called Chart gets lost in the forest. While he strays in the dark green wild, his identity becomes clearer in the memories of people who keep talking about his vanishing. These people, who had never acknowledged Chart's existence before, are now trying to build an image of him from their crumbling memories that are scattered in the shady wood. *Prathet chart*, meanwhile, is the Thai word for nation-state. It goes without saying that this double entendre comments on the current quest for national identity and its discursive construction.

Other independent productions focus on the recent political state of the nation. *The Truth Be Told* (Pimpaka Towira, 2007) is a documentary portrait of Supinya Klangnarong, a prominent Thai journalist, university lecturer and media rights activist who, in 2005, had accused the telecommunications giant Shin Corporation, owned by the family of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, of colluding with the government. The corporation then brought an \$11-million defamation lawsuit against Supinya. The film accompanies her during the months of her trial and comments on the legal and constitutional turmoil in contemporary Thai society by covering the political scene in the last days of the Thaksin administration, the 2006 Thai coup d'état and the post-coup atmosphere.

Another sensitive issue is that of the treatment of minorities. *Muallaf* (*The Convert*, Panu Aree, Kaweenipon Ketprasit, Kong Rithdee, 2008) portrays a young Thai woman who, like the country's majority, is Buddhist, but decides to convert when she falls in love with a Muslim man from Southern Thailand.

Independent and short films are hardly perceived by a broad audience, due to their subcultural status, a cultural gray area that enables them to touch on sensitive issues and still largely evade censorship. However, this has changed with the implementation of the New Film Act in 2008. Up till then, the routine practice of the censor board did not extend beyond examining feature-length films submitted for commercial release in the country. An important feature of the new law, however, is the extended power of the

authorities to censor moving images that will receive international circulation, and to deal with domestic exhibition sites that work outside the old definition of commercial cinemas – possible sanctions viewed with great concern by those striving for free speech (May 2009). The first film banned by the new censorship legislation was Thunskā Pansittivorakul's *Boriwen nii yu phai tai gaan gak gan / This Area is Under Quarantine* (2008), which was cancelled from the programme of the 7<sup>th</sup> World Film Festival of Bangkok just days before its planned screening.

## 2.2 The Idea of the Nation in Contemporary Thai Film

For the film industry, the economic crisis meant a cutback, resulting in shutting down whole production departments and delaying projects. Moviegoers as well as theater owners became more careful in spending their money, and Thai movies became their second choice after Hollywood imports (Anchalee 2001, 159). In this context, successful Thai films were all the more sensational. Until the early 2000s, many of them drew their success from their consideration of Thainess – they focus on Thailand, its history and culture, and draw upon their sense of national belonging, making them popular with the local audience.

Thainess takes on many different cinematic forms and is present under varying aspects. «New Thai Cinema», while in many ways being a novelty, often can be seen as conforming and referring back to old Thai values, with recurrent themes such as the search for home, family and happiness, and nostalgic longing for the good old days when life was less confusing in terms of national and cultural identity.

### ***Nang yon yuk* and Folklore: Stories of the Nation**

For a while, Thai history became the main topic of commercial cinema: Roughly half of the new productions made between 2000 and 2002 were period movies (Anchalee 2002(1)). These so-called *nang yon yuk* (literally, films returning to the past) became highly popular and boomed after the huge local success of *Nang Nak* (Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999), a retelling of a well-known ghost legend situated in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is probably Thailand's best-known ghost story and has been retold and made into television soaps and movies dozens of times; however, the look of this version was outstanding. The filmmakers paid careful attention to visual detail, emphasizing the story's historicity and presenting the country's cultural roots as its legacy. This concern for celebrating the past can be found in a number of period movies, forming a subgenre that might be called the heritage film. According to May Adadol Ingawanij, heritage films feature «the presentation of Thainess as visual attraction» combined with a subject matter

from «the biography of the Thai nation» and an emphasis on production values that live up to international standards (May Adadol 2007, 180).

After 2004, period movies have been in decline, perhaps due to an oversupply of the genre and low-quality productions. Instead, comedy and horror genres have taken over the mainstream (Anchalee 2006, 156).

Films focusing on important historic events, often combined with portraits of national leaders, represent a special area of heritage films. They feature a strongly patriotic context, celebrating the glory and the power of the nation, personified in its leader, the king or queen. Thailand is shown resisting exterior forces, mainly Burmese troops that try to invade and destroy it; the battles end in victory.<sup>12</sup> The most prominent exponents of this kind of heritage film are *Suriyothai* (Chatri Chalermsukol, 2001), *Bang Rajan* (Thanit Jitnukul, 2000), and *Naresuan* (Chatri Chalermsukol, 2006). These films are made by a senior generation of directors and stand slightly apart from the cinema upswing, having a special status: they are regarded more like national monuments than regular movies. This is especially striking in the case of *Suriyothai*, an epic biopic of Queen Suriyothai, the wife of a 16<sup>th</sup> century Thai king, who died in battle to defend Thailand against Burma. The production was co-funded by the Royal Family, with the premiere screening presented to the King and Queen. *Suriyothai*'s publicity slogan *pappayon haeng Siam Prathet* (The Movie of the Siamese Land) already indicated its national significance, making it the absolute must-see *nang yon yuk* for all Thais and, unsurprisingly, an all-time box office record. It was also one of the least critiqued films; most film critics avoided comment (Anchalee 2002 (1), 3).

The revival of nationalism relies on traditionalist ideologies. The story of *Hom rong* (*The Overture*, Ittisoonporn Vichailak, 2004) is exemplary. It depicts the life of Sorn, a Thai classical musician, from the late 1800s to the 1940s. Sorn's *ranad ek*, a Thai xylophone, becomes an obvious symbol for loyalty to old Thai values. In the 1940s, Thailand was

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<sup>12</sup> Dislike of the Burmese is still widespread among the Thai population nowadays, probably owing to the fact that Burma has been Thailand's main enemy in war during the past centuries. This bias might well have helped the success of *Bang Rajan*. The dislike and different Thai approaches toward the subject are described in Pimpaka 2001.



under the rule of Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram, whose government called for the accelerated modernisation of Thailand. As a result, performances of traditional Thai music, dance and theatre were frowned upon. Playing the *ranad ek* becomes an act of cultural resistance, mirroring the contemporary longing for a validation of national culture to better define national identity, and to reinforce the attitude frequently found in cultural nationalism, namely that foreign influences spoil Thai culture. Modernisation was promoted during the postwar period with the aim of making the country keep up with the development of Western nations and was strongly linked with pro-Americanism. Faced with a growing number of socialist regimes in the neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, Thailand sought to cooperate with the USA in order to receive protection against the threat of communism and socialism. This subject, cultural oppression by obedience to Western capitalist forces, is of obvious and remarkable appeal in 2004, mirroring the zeitgeist of Thailand after the 1997 economic crash and the scepticism toward what is perceived as Western cultural hegemony.

In his influential inquiry into nationalism, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as follows:

It is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.

It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (...) The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them (...) has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. (...) Finally, it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship (Anderson 1983, 6ff.).

In Anderson's perception, the idea of the nation as an essentialist identity is an imaginary construction, a form of narration, a state of mind generated by material practices. This narrative relies on objects, be they elaborate or trivial, that become signs of a national culture, signifying «nationness» by way of a performative act that suggests the nation as an archaic, mythical space (Bhabha 1990, 300). When applied to Thai national representation, and seen against the background of the Thai «regime of images» mentioned earlier and the great significance it ascribes to performativity, the concept of

performing the nation appears all the more crucial. In a traditionalist way, stories of nation-building and -preserving play an important role in constituting the imaginary nationhood; They often take the form of various myths which are frequently interconnected and overlap. Standard myths found in the context of nationhood include those of foundation and of territory – claiming there is a particular territory where the nation was first founded and assumed its purest form – of military valour to safeguard the nation-state, and of the renewal of the tainted present to create a better future for the nation based on the values of the past. *Suriyothai*, *Naresuan* and *Bang Rajan* are prime examples of the reworking of these standard myths applied to Thai history and nationhood.

Another type of narrative that contributes to the notion of national cohesion is folklore. Besides period movies, films based on popular folk tales and well-known literary works were popular as well. Representing the classic canon of literature, myths and legends, films such as *Phra Apai Manee* (Chalart Sriwanna, 2003), *Angulimala* (Sutape Tunnirut, 2003) and *Nang Nak* evoke familiarity. Presented as storytelling heritage, they represent cultural links that bind the Thai people together. As is the case with stories of nation-building, their significance is based on myths of ethnogenesis and antiquity that delineate and legitimize the collective existence of the ethnic group, and on the myth of kinship and shared descent. The underlying function of these myths is to ensure that the integrity of the group is safeguarded, that cultural production is not prejudiced, and that the collective world made simple by myth remains, so that individuals may construct their identities as individuals and simultaneously as members of a community.<sup>13</sup> Myths structure culture and express a group's identity. As such, they have political and social implications: since they concern the formation of the universe or, in a present-day discourse, the nation in which we live, they inevitably deal with forces of creation and destruction, issues of power and selfhood. Myths of identity are therefore equally myths of alterity, in that they speak about the imagined self as well as the imagined Other, adversary, or enemy (Overing 1997, 16). In its notion of nationhood, Thailand is always imagined as a whole, as a unity – even though the country has been ethnically highly

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<sup>13</sup> See Schöpflin 1997, 35, whose taxonomy of myths has provided the framework for these comments.

heterogeneous for centuries, with ethnic groups speaking different languages and dialects and practicing different religions. Homogeneity serves as a unifying myth, soothing differences that might arise from ethnic diversity and lead to conflict.

As Annette Hamilton observes, this kind of cultural nationalism and pride in self-confirmed identity is typical of postcolonial situations. In the case of Thailand, however, it is interesting to observe that nationalism is prevalent even though the country has never been colonized. The importance of national representation is rooted not so much in the idea of being confirmed in the eye of an Other, of resisting colonial power, but instead plays a role in the expression of internal conflicts and tensions. It is part of a power issue over the cultural reproduction of imagery, caught between elements such as censorship and state control, that are determined to shape the public image of the state with a traditionalist stance, and would benefit from more liberal, critical self-reflection in the context of a global cultural field (Hamilton 1994, 160).

### **The Country, the City and the Golden Age: «Authenticity» and Nostalgia**

Other films draw on Thainess in a different way: by inspiring nostalgia for the simple, rural life of the ancestors. The contrast between the rural and the urban is a recurrent motif, idealizing country life and characterizing the city as a hostile place where basic human values and warmth are endangered. The two contrasting spaces signify the traditional and the modern ways of life.

*Monrak Transistor* (Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 2001) is built around this contrast. The film's story centers on Paen, a young, naïve villager, and his odyssey to Bangkok and back in search of a career in show business. While his village home is depicted as an idyllic world where time seems to stand still, the big city is shown as a corrupt, ugly and scary place. The contrast is reinforced in the film's visual style. The rural scenes are filmed in vivid colors and bright light, featuring close-ups of nature details, emphasizing the peace and harmony of Paen's country home and family life.



Rural life...

The Bangkok scenes are darker, shot with high-speed film stock that was underexposed and pushed in the lab later on, to achieve a grainy, rough look that mirrors Paen's feeling of being lost in a harsh world (Anchalee 2006, 152).



... and the chaos of Bangkok, all Stills from *Mon-Rak Transistor*

In a scene where Sadao, Paen's young wife, comes to look for him in Bangkok, she carries two plastic bottles of pure rainwater from their village as a gift for him. Sadly, she is unable to find him. As she narrowly escapes the fierce Bangkok traffic, she drops the bottles that roll across the asphalt and are lost. Shown in a close-up, the bottles symbolize the loss of purity and innocence that the hard city life imposes on newcomers. At the same time, they signify Sadao's loss of faith and, eventually, her disillusionment with Paen.

Country life has always been a powerful symbol for the ideology of Thainess, representing a peaceful, harmonious home where family and community values prevail. The meaning it has held as a reaction to rapid modernization since World War II has recently been further emphasized in the context of globalization: as the tension grows between the desire to be Thai and the urge to participate in global consumerism and

hedonism, the rural sphere beckons as a nostalgic ideal (Reynolds 2002, 313). It also signifies abundance – agricultural life, though at times meaning hard work, cultivates self-sustainability and a trusting connection to nature's generosity. Not only does this utopian rural world harbour an ideal of beauty and harmony, but also of moral values such as simplicity, respect for nature, and egalitarianism. It thus becomes an ethical stance, an especially pure way of life. Unlike the situation in many industrialized countries where country life is completely imaginary, since self-contained rural lifestyles have almost completely vanished, Thai country life continues to be a real, tangible alternative to urban life.

The urban sphere is equivalent with Bangkok, the capital, as it is the only Thai metropolis. The role Bangkok plays in movies is usually that of the oppressively huge, gritty, disorienting city, a place where innocent country folk flock in search of money, fame, or both, more often than not losing themselves in the concrete jungle and its moral filth. Strewn in are signifiers of modernity and internationality: highways, the airport, the occasional foreigner. In fact, different depictions of Bangkok are a rarity (Williamson 2006).

The divide between Bangkok and the rural is a recurrent figure in Thai intellectual, literary and artistic traditions, especially in a movement known as *sinlapa pua chiwit* (art for life), which is highly concerned with social realist ideals and aesthetics, appreciation of folk art and a commitment to the political liberation of the masses (May Adadol 2006, 81). It was regarded as an instance of cultural opposition during the Cold War military dictatorship. Thai cinema has a longer connection with the country motif as well. In the 1970s, a cinematic movement subsequently called the «New Wave» emerged.

Filmmakers such as Wichit Kounavudh, Cherd Songsri, Euthana Mukdasnit and Chatrichalerm Yukol have based the look of their films on the aesthetics of social realism. They often adapted *sinlapa pua chiwit* literature and used *lookthung*, country folk music, in their movies, repeatedly drawing on the myth of the rural.

This myth, as an embodiment of the idea of Thainess, at the same time implies the notion of country life as original culture. The imagined authenticity of the rural, however, overlooks the fact that indigenous culture is, in itself, composed of manifold influences of

the varying regions that nowadays form the state of Thailand. Thus, the myth of authenticity is linked with the myth of homogeneity mentioned above.

Since film scenes of the rural world imagine it as arcadian and archaic, they often give the impression of timelessness or else of a strange, hybrid time, a modern-day present with retro touches, which are sometimes presented as icons of authentic Thai culture, such as the temple fair scenes at the opening of *Monrak Transistor* or the protagonist's village homecoming in *Mah Nakorn* (*Citizen Dog*, Wisit Sasanatieng, 2004). The rural utopia is usually linked with a sense of nostalgia – like the past in general, it is a precious sphere that is nowadays lost, or endangered. The protagonist of *Tawipop* (*The Siam Renaissance*, Surapong Pinijkhar, 2004) is Maneejan, a contemporary Thai woman who discovers her ability to journey back and forth between the present day and the 1850s, where she eventually serves as a source of information at the court of King Mongkut, Rama IV, supplying him with her knowledge of modern-day Thailand. As she falls in love with a palace official and has to decide which epoch to stay in, she chooses the past. Naturally, the linking of story time and ideological content is even more of an issue in the aforementioned period movies concerned with nation-building.

The imaginary past sometimes takes the form of pastiche: At an open-air movie show in *Monrak Transistor*, the village audience watches with delight as an old Thai classic flickers over the screen, in a setting reminiscent of typical Thai village entertainment of the olden days. Looking closer, however, the movie turns out to be *Fah Talai Jone* (*Tears of the Black Tiger*, Wisit Sasanatieng, 2000), a recent film partially modelled on the style of 1960s Thai action movies, at times mimicking the faded color and the scratchiness of old prints. The anachronism is a smart comment on the Golden Age as imaginary sphere: in a scene that seems from the past, or perhaps from a timeless archaic world, appears a movie that is not old, but just looks old – actually, it is probably younger than the time the scene is set in; it is a kind of remade, faux past (Stephens 2003).



An old-style open-air film screening in *Monrak Transistor*

*2499 Antapan Krong Muang (Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters*, Nonzee Nimibutr, 1997) places a strong visual emphasis on the iconic status of objects. The wooden shophouses, permed female hairstyles and glass bottles of Bireley, a local soft drink, all presented in careful detail and extreme close-ups, are as iconic for the 1950s in Thailand as James Dean is globally.

To lay such a strong emphasis on images signifying the past might, in some cases, reduce their meaning. As historicity is substituted with an indulgence in past styles and icons, multifaceted objects become one-track signifiers for an ideologically affirmed nationhood, and retro signs function as «nostalgia without history» (May Adadol 2006, 93). What appears to be a carefree postmodernist juggling of meaning might, at second glance, well be a sign of scepticism towards an imagined authenticity that seems questionable because of its reproducibility. As Fredric Jameson points out, two chief characteristics of postmodernity are its use of pastiche and a crisis in historicity – cultural collage without normative grounding of its elements, as well as a disconnection from historical knowledge to the lived experience of the present everyday world (Jameson 1991, 22 and 279). Both elements converge in the use of images as one-track signifiers for an imaginary past.



### Images of the Self and the Foreign Gaze

Since the mid-1980s, Thailand has become a prime travel destination. Tourism has boomed, bringing an enormous influx of foreigners. Before then, the country was hardly known to the average European; the rise of tourism suddenly placed it prominently on the map. At the beginning of the boom, the Tourism Authority of Thailand conducted an international campaign on the perception of the country in overseas markets, and an international advertising agency was hired to promote Thailand's image abroad. The slogans and the imagery that sprung from this campaign have been only slightly varied since and play on clichés of the exotic East. Thailand is promoted as an Orientalist construction of an exotic paradise with stunning landscapes and as a mysterious and spiritual «Land of Smiles». It is noteworthy that this exoticized presentation of Thainess is a self-constructed one. Further on, the promotion of Thai culture – meaning traditional arts and crafts – was added in the campaign, partly also out of growing concerns about the damage being done to Thai institutions and social structures by the sudden social and economic change (Reynolds 2002, 311).

Travel guidebooks and tourist catalogues endlessly reproduce this spectacle, presenting the country as a product to be consumed for tourism. Its standard icons – palm-fringed beaches, paddy fields, Thai boxers, elephants, spicy food, temples with Buddha figures and orange-clad monks, and the tuk-tuk – have made their way into countless photo albums and onto souvenir t-shirts, along with the stylized official slogan «Amazing Thailand».



Tourist t-shirts for sale in Chatuchak Market, Bangkok



The international mass media have played a vital role in the foreign imagination's constructions of Thailand. Countless TV documentaries and travelogues have been produced since the 1980s; more often than not, they perpetuate cultural stereotypes of exoticism and refer to the same official totems of Thainess for tourists offered by Thailand itself (Harrison 2005, 325).

Besides being portrayed in documentaries, Thailand has repeatedly served as a setting for fiction films made by foreign producers. It does not always figure as Thailand, and has often served as a replacement setting for Vietnam War films when Vietnam itself was not accessible as a movie location, or similarly for Burma and Cambodia. In other cases, its natural beauty is used for stories set in a country of dreams with perpetual sunshine, or as an exotic backdrop, showing protagonists enjoying relaxing holidays and sensual pleasures or indulging in adventure and action, such as in *The Man With the Golden Gun* (Guy Hamilton, UK 1974).

Along with the fantasy of relaxation and leisure comes the fantasy of decadence and freedom from social restraint. TV documentary coverage, especially European or US, has also focused on the less flattering topic of sex workers, HIV/AIDS, the drug trade and gender ambiguity – at times in a sensationalist way that has caused a rather one-sided, misleading perspective on the country. These «sleaze image» features have been taken up and exploited by Hong Kong and Japanese B-grade productions<sup>14</sup> as well as Hollywood, connotating Thailand with drug trafficking, the sex industry, lawlessness and criminality in films such as *Brokedown Palace* (Jonathan Kaplan, USA 1999) or *The Beach* (Danny Boyle, USA/UK 2000), in which a group of young travellers discovers not only a hippie utopia on a remote island, but also an immense field of cannabis plants, their own idea of paradise. The fantasy of escape from real life and from the seriousness of civilisation is often linked with the notion of the tropics as a primitive paradise where anything goes. Ultimately, though, paradise reveals its dark sides, and travellers are relieved to return home safely.

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<sup>14</sup> For examples, see Lewis 2006, 154.

The duality of the imagined tropics as the Other to home, at the same time enticing and dangerous, is a commonplace of the colonial gaze. It is based on a cultural hegemony that regards the Exotic as primitive and the beholder's own culture as more highly developed.

This trope is so popular that it has been occasionally parodied. In *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (Beeban Kidron, UK/USA 2004), the protagonist Bridget is sent to Thailand by her employer, a TV station, to cover for a travel broadcast. The sequence of her arrival begins in the manner of this broadcast, with Bridget speaking into the camera, which takes the TV camera's point of view, reporting on the usual tourist sites and activities in typical travel agency language. As the plot progresses, Bridget travels to a beach resort, unknowingly consumes drugs in the form of a magic mushroom omelette, gets caught up in cocaine smuggling, again unknowingly, and does time in a local jail. Such is the abundance of Thai clichés in this plot that it cannot possibly convey anything but than irony, which fits perfectly into the over-the-top style of comedy that characterizes the film.



Still from *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*: Bridget reports on a Thai cooking class

### **Mirroring the Foreign Gaze: Deconstructive Thainess**

Thainess, as a set of images created by Thailand for foreigners, has been internationally received, reproduced and further equipped with other, less welcome features. As a whole,

this revised image creates ambivalence in its country of origin: the line between self-promotion and being reduced to clichés by a foreign gaze is a thin one.

This is how we count the days. June: the Germans come to the Island – football cleats, big T-shirts, thick tongues – speaking like spitting. July: the Italians, the French, the British, the Americans. The Italians like pad thai, its affinity with spaghetti. They like light fabrics, sunglasses, leather sandals. The French like plump girls, rambutans, disco music, baring their breasts. The British are here to work on their pasty complexions, their penchant for hashish. Americans are the fattest, the stingiest of the bunch. (...) August brings the Japanese. (...) By the end of August, when the monsoon starts to blow, they're all consorting, slapping each other's backs, slipping each other drugs, sleeping with each other. By September they've all deserted, leaving the Island to the Aussies and the Chinese, who are so omnipresent one need not mention them at all (Lapcharoensap 2005, 1).

Rattawut Lapcharoensap's short story *Farangs* is told from the perspective of a young Thai man who goes out on a date with a female tourist from overseas. He feels strongly ambivalent towards her. Her foreignness makes her interesting, hard to grasp; she belongs to a different world, strange and far away, to which she returns in the end, leaving him with an annoyed, degraded feeling that he was merely an exotic fling. The locals' ambivalence toward *farang*, Western foreigners, and their perception of the country is reflected and twisted around in the story's opening that tells of the way a local perceives tourists.

This ambivalence toward the foreign perception of the self applies to the cinematic gaze as well:

As Thai cinema of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seeks increasingly to appeal to international audiences, it is this set of [stereotypical—NB] images which it perforce takes as the necessary ingredients for their entertainment. At the same time, however, a dichotomy inevitably emerges between the images the outside world is disposed to see and those which Thai filmmakers see fit to promote them (Harrison 2005, 326).

As a country with an image that is strongly connotated internationally, how does Thailand portray itself? What does it identify with via its films, without blindly reflecting itself via a foreign gaze? Besides the aforementioned nationalistic point of view, national identity sometimes manifests itself deconstructively, by reflective subversion of the gaze

from outside. This is a recent phenomenon in Thai film, appearing since the post-1997 boom.

In *Ruang talok 69 (Sixty-nine)* (Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 1999), Tum, a young woman recently fired from her job finds an instant noodle box filled with money deposited at her door by mistake. After accidentally killing the gangsters who are after the money, she decides to go abroad to start a new life. In a farewell letter to her mother, she writes: «I have found a job abroad and am leaving... Do not worry, it is not the kind of job we Thai women are known for.»

Sometimes, the foreign perception is treated ironically, a frequent target being *farang* tourist characters such as the disoriented young couple in *Khun Krabi Pi Rabad (Sars Wars)* (Thaweewat Wantha, 2004), shown struggling with a large city map amidst chaotic traffic on an enormous intersection, intercut with magnificent views of Bangkok sightseeing locations. Less fortunate, a young half-US, half-Thai backpacker in *Kuen phra chan tem douang (Isarn Special)* (Mingmongkol Sonakul, 2002) does his best to get to know the country and to find his roots, even speaking broken Thai, only to be finally led off by the police under false accusations of petty crime.

*Satree Lex 2 (Iron Ladies II)* (Yongyooth Thongkonthun, 2003), the sequel to the surprise hit *Satree Lex (Iron Ladies)* (Yongyooth Thongkonthun, 2000) about the rise of a gay and transgender volleyball team, tells the story of the team's reunion after a temporary split. In an attempt to retrieve one of the members from a job in China, the team travels abroad. On a trip to Xishuangbanna, a well-known tourist destination in Southern China, they admire the local folklore and the traditional costumes of the region, gushing «How exotic!» This exclamation becomes funny through the fact that exoticism is turned around here, proclaimed by cross-dressing characters that are themselves a spectacular sight, especially in the traditional surroundings of the upcountry Chinese province. Viewed abroad, this scene is made still more humorous by the fact that the exoticism of a Thai comedy about gender issues is likely one of the film's main selling points.

Different points of view also appear in the Thai and the foreign treatment of landscape. Beaches are prominent settings in movies made in Thailand. Foreign productions usually

cast the seascape as a holiday idyll; a famous example is Ao Maya, the unspoilt, hidden dream beach every traveller longs for in *The Beach*. The seaside also often features as a spectacular setting for adventure, such as Ko Tapu, the island with iconic rock formations shown in *The Man With the Golden Gun* and famous since as «James Bond Island». Both film locations have become prominent through their screen presence and are now major sightseeing spots.



Still from *The Man with the Golden Gun*

In Thai productions, beaches often look different. *Ruang Rak Noi Nid Mahasan (Last Life in the Universe*, Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 2004) is the story of a sort of friendship that develops between Kenji, a Japanese man living in Bangkok, and Noi, a Thai woman. She takes him to her house in a small seaside town. As they drive past the beachfront, the characteristic seafront promenade reveals the location to be Bang Saen, a popular weekend getaway for Bangkok residents. The beach of this Thai-style resort is usually crowded, decked out with tables and covered with dark sunshades; in this scene, however, it is empty, reflecting the melancholy mood of the characters feeling lonely and lost. «It looks fun here», he says, but she replies, «No, it's boring.» The weather is overcast. As Kenji and Noi stroll around the beach later on, it looks messy and unkempt: rubbish and a bloated dead dog wash up on the shore. «Let's go home», she says.



The dead dog on the beach in *Ruang rak Noi Nid mahasan*

In *Tears of the Black Tiger*, two childhood sweethearts meet at university, ten years after their separation, and spend an afternoon at Bang Pu, a nearby beach. While the beach as a romantic or sensual backdrop is commonplace in love scenes, it takes on a slightly different meaning here as it reminds the protagonists of their childhood memories, the fleeting nature of time and the ephemerality of joy. They reflect on how they regret growing up, as adult life brings sadness and causes a restless chase after happiness. The beach here is a setting for romance that has a very soft, restrained quality, mixed with bittersweet musings on life and loss that reflect a Buddhist background. As if to accentuate this unusual treatment of the beach as a romantic setting, the scene ends with a red evening sun sinking into the sea – in time lapse.



Stills from *Fah talai jone*

A special twist on this subject matter are the beaches and coastlines in a collection of tsunami digital films. A year after the 2004 tsunami that struck large parts of southern Thailand along with areas in India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Malaysia, the Thai Ministry of Culture and the Bangkok World Film Festival commissioned 14 filmmakers to shoot one short film each that was situated in southern Thailand and featured the tsunami or its aftermath. These shorts were then compiled and shown in a commemorative ceremony. In all of them, the seaside figures prominently: the disaster is over, calm has returned to the landscape, but memories of the tsunami prevail.

In *Smiles of the Fifth Night* (Sonthaya Subyen, 2005), the landscapes are empty and barren. The camera tracks along parched mud flats with dead tree stumps, a stranded boat and ruined buildings, all shown in ghostly silence – the tsunami seems to have taken all life away with it. Text runs along the lower edge of the frame: passages from tourists' letters to the area's population, telling of their post-tsunami impressions. «You are amazing», they write, «you smile in spite of the disaster», «I shall soon return to my favorite resort in spite of the tsunami», or «I have now become a Buddhist». The stark contrast between the silent, striking images and the phrases of people admiring the rebuilding from their safe, well-to-do point of view becomes increasingly irritating. However, the film ends with sunbeams filtering through the canopy in a grove of palm trees: hope returns.

Deconstructive Thainess is a kind of nationalistic awareness that is developed from the negation of images generated by a foreign gaze, by emphasizing the origin of the entity behind the gaze and laying bare the constructedness of the stereotypical image. The irony toward the foreign gaze is at times hard to separate from an irony towards the exoticized self and thus, towards a stylization of one's own national self-image and the desire to promote it.

Interestingly, deconstructive Thainess also appears in the work of several contemporary Thai artists who use elements of everyday culture that are regarded as national icons or clichés and place them in an unexpected surrounding, giving them a new meaning. In one of his first shows, Rirkrit Tirawanij famously cooked *pad thai* in the New York Museum of Modern Art, turning the acts of cooking and eating into an art performance involving the audience. At the 2007 documenta 12 in Kassel, Sakarin Krue-On planted paddy fields

on the exhibition grounds. Here, again, not the rice fields themselves are works of art, but their perception as foreign in Germany and their placement in an unexpected surrounding.



### **2.3 National Culture and the Global Market**

As we have seen, the aspiration to convincingly promote Thainess to the outside world generates tension and ambivalence:

(...) This endeavour entails not only the marketing of a cultural self-image that can be neither static nor monolithic in nature and can instead only be imagined and invented, but it additionally relies on, interacts and colludes with preconceived illusions of Thailand that are nurtured by the West (Harrison 2005, 324).

Since the indigenous film market has discovered the internationality of the film business and increasingly aspires to the export of its productions as an income source, the complexity of the country's self-representation gains additional meaning. Issues appreciated by the home audience, such as Thai nationalism or typical Thai genres, might appeal in a lesser way to foreign viewers. On the other hand, exoticism might well prove attractive and an important factor in the marketing of Thai film abroad, while it might seem rather tacky when viewed in its home country.

The diversity of possible audiences is visible in the wide variety of movies Thailand produces. The target audiences prompt a split in production planning, between upcoming projects that opt either for home markets and perhaps the neighbouring countries of Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, which have very small local film industries and represent a minor secondary market, or for foreign markets, often via coproductions or foreign funding.

#### **Transnational Influences and Coproductions**

Success, naturally, calls for imitation. One way Thai films have pursued success is to adapt the style of East Asian films that have received international acclaim. A notable influence lies in Hong Kong cinema, probably because of the importance of the large Chinese-Thai community, the local popularity of Hong Kong stars and the great attention Hong Kong movies have enjoyed in Europe and the United States since the mid-1990s, when they were promoted from niche status for the occasional fan or film buff to a constant place in the cinematic world, well-known to audiences and film scholars alike. The work of Danny and Oxide Pang, Hong Kong natives who frequently work in the Thai

film industry, is often strongly reminiscent of that of Wong Kar-Wai. *Bangkok Dangerous* (1999), a thriller about a deaf-mute hitman and his excursions into the Bangkok underworld, mirrors the atmosphere of Hong Kong cop thrillers such as John Woo's *Dip huet seung hung* (*The Killer*, HK 1989) or Wong Kar-Wai's *Duo luo tian shi* (*Fallen Angels*, HK 1995). Their horror movie *Khon hen phii* (*The Eye / Gin gwai*, 2002) is aesthetically and atmospherically close to Japanese horror films such as *Ringu* (*The Ring*, Hideo Nakata, J 1998), an enormous success that was responsible for a worldwide interest in horror cinema from Japan and, shortly after, East Asia in general. Interestingly, *The Eye* as well as *Bangkok Dangerous* have since been remade as large-scale Hollywood productions, the latter by the Pang Brothers themselves.

Japanese cinema, especially horror, is highly influential on Thai cinema. Its success has triggered a horror wave that has guided the typical Thai ghost movie, which usually includes humorous sequences, toward the more serious and psychological forms of Japanese horror; the results have been slicker, less humorous and more subdued films such as *The Eye 2* (*Khon hen phii 2 / Gin gwai 2*, Danny and Oxide Pang, 2004), *Shutter* (Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, 2004), or *Dek hor* (*Dorm*, Songyos Sugmakanan, 2006). Recent Thai horror films can thus be regarded as a new sub-genre encouraged by transnational influences, differing from the classic Thai ghost movie. Another role model is South Korean cinema, which has expanded dramatically over the course of the past ten years and was often compared to Thai cinema during the most optimistic phase of the Thai film industry after 1997.

As Kittisak Suwannapokin, a well-respected Thai film scholar and critic, remarks, the result of the chase for financial return is a slew of Thai movies that look like knock-offs of something already seen. Taking recent productions as an example, he likens *Last Life in the Universe* (Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 2004) to Japanese arthouse cinema, the Pang Brothers' work to that of Wong Kar-Wai, and Thai action films to Jackie Chan movies. There remains, in his opinion, a severe lack of films that reflect Thai life and culture and

a lack of clear identity.<sup>15</sup> Because films that emulate successful models rely on marketable formulas, they easily become predictable and lose their local flavor, so that in trying to please a wider audience, they might not be able to retain local ones.

The emulation of other cinemas might well grow out of Thailand's attempt to become a part of what is sometimes called «Pan-Asian Cinema». This imagined construction vaguely encompasses popular East Asian cinematic elements, styles and genres such as Martial Arts and Horror. It seems to rely on the generic attribute «Asian» as a selling point, usually meaning East or, much more rarely, Southeast Asia, without specifying the films' places of origin. In doing so, it feeds on a generalized image of «Asia» where several countries or regions share a common or similar style, aesthetics and subject matter.

As an example, *Ong-Bak* (Prachya Pinkaew, 2003) relies on the global popularity of the Martial Arts genre, which is often generally perceived as «Asian», and taps into its fan base, ignoring the fact that Martial Arts movies had previously been a novelty in Thai cinema. While Chinese kung fu movies and Japanese Samurai films and TV series have been highly popular in Thailand, *Ong-Bak* was the first mainstream production to employ Muay Thai, Thai Boxing, as a spectacle. In doing so, it creates a new space within the Martial Arts genre for Thai cinema, establishing a new relationship between the national cinemas. *Ong-Bak*'s star Tony Jaa Phanom has since repeatedly been likened to Bruce Lee, in reference to Lee's transformation, over the course of his career, from local hero to transnational icon.

Another reason for the interweaving of film styles and topics between nations is the rise of East and Southeast Asian coproductions. As the film industries of several East Asian nations have grown and established themselves in recent years, the number of coproductions has increased, as have transnational cultural and economic relations and artistic cross-influences.

*Ruang Rak Noi Nid Mahasan* (*Last Life in the Universe*, Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 2004), a Thai-European coproduction, was made by a Thai cast and crew, Christopher Doyle, an

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<sup>15</sup> Kittisak Suwannapokin, in a conversation with the author, February 2004.

Australian director of photography, and Tadanobu Asano, a Japanese star. The story focuses on Kenji, a Japanese man living in Bangkok, and his acquaintance Noi, a Thai bar girl. Transnational processes of communication are one of the film's main topics: After initial difficulties and misunderstandings, a kind of friendly bond starts to form with the help of three languages: Thai, Japanese and English. This Thai-Japanese encounter emblemizes the regional situation; the political, economic and cultural relations of the countries are an important, complementary alternative to the orientation of Asian states toward Europe and the USA. They entail the transgression of geographical, linguistic and cultural borders. It is indicative that the friendship between Kenji and Noi develops in a private space, a kind of no man's land: Noi's messy, half-deserted house near the seaside becomes a welcome getaway from the challenges of outside life, a strange haven that seems cut off from any context and offers refuge. After his first meal with Noi, Kenji asks: «Can I go to your house?» Noi answers: «My home... very far.» Kenji's sole and immediate response to this is: «Good.»

Coproductions offer film directors access to additional markets and audiences. Ekachai Uekrongtham is a native Thai who works as a theater director in Singapore and has directed several films, some of which are set in Thailand. *Pleasure Factory* (*Kuaile Gongchang*, 2007) is a docudrama set in the red-light district of Singapore. It features a Japanese, Taiwanese, Singaporean and Australian-Lao cast and was coproduced by Hong Kong and Singapore-Thai production companies as well as Fortissimo Films from the Netherlands. A recent movie of Ekachai's, *The Coffin* (2008), is a Thai coproduction with a mixed-nationality cast. This transnationality grants Ekachai's films a double theatrical home market release, in Thailand and in Singapore, as it does to the films of the Pang Brothers. Another filmmaker to participate in coproductions is Nonzee Nimibutr. His film *Jan Dara* (2001), an erotic thriller featuring Hong Kong star Christy Chung, was released in Thai and Mandarin versions (Lewis 2006, 155). A year later, he contributed an episode to the Hong Kong-Korean-Thai coproduction *Three*, a ghost movie in three parts, one from each of the production countries.

### **Thainess «Goes Inter»: Self-Exoticisation and Dual Readings**

Even though the Thai language acts as a natural limitation to developing an export industry, filmmakers are increasingly trying to break into foreign markets, encouraged by surging interest in Asian cinema since the late 1990s. As Thai film has become transnational, or has, in Thai-English, «gone inter» – travelling abroad, adapting foreign influences or merging with foreign industries – it increasingly moves into a position that is potentially paradoxical:

To compete successfully and consume knowingly in the international markets of the post-Cold War world Thais must adopt the trappings of the global competitor and the global consumer. (...) Indeed, any product with an «inter» brand name that therefore smacks of foreignness is highly desirable, even if it is made in Thailand. (...) Yet struggling against the strong identification to be globalized and un-Thai are deep-seated desires to remain comfortably within the ethno-ideology of Thainess (...) (Reynolds 2002, 312).

In order to keep up with global consumer culture, the film industry aims for new standards in storylines and in production value. In fact, as Kong Rithdee points out, (...) this fantasy of «going international» is so intense that it's become a prerequisite in the process of conceiving ideas for a new movie: Will foreign viewers like this? If not, should we do it? The exotic «Thainess», in various forms and guises, still sells. The new age of Thai cinema has begun, but its old age of innocence has ended (Kong 2002).

As a consequence, some films become a sort of cultural hybrid, designed for a double audience, both of them with very different expectations and viewing preferences. The ambivalence between the desire to appeal to an international audience and the wish to maintain a cultural stance that represents a pure national cultural tradition is visible in many contemporary Thai movies (Harrison 2005, 324).

As a prime example for this «dichotomy between local meaning and global marketing», Rachel Harrison analyses the storyline of the aforementioned martial arts movie *Ong-Bak* (Harrison 2005, 332ff.). The location of the film's opening is a small upcountry village in northeastern Thailand, a deeply rural and impoverished area that the film idealizes as a pure, innocent country idyll, as elaborated in the above chapter on the Rural as symbol of Thainess. The peasants' peaceful life is disrupted, however, when the head of a Buddha statue is stolen from a temple by a morally corrupt Bangkok salesman. Ting, a village

youngster and Muay Thai adept, volunteers to save the community from its spiritual crisis and travels to the capital where he fights a number of opponents, finally winning the statue back and restoring the natural Thai order of things. Strikingly, while the background of Ting's enemies is obscure, they are clearly all foreigners – amongst others, a Japanese gangster, an Australian, a brutal Western soldier and a Burmese. The film's sequel, *Tom Yam Goong* (Prachya Pinkaew, 2005), follows a similar plot; this time, Ting travels to Australia to retrieve his family's pet elephant. Again, he defends himself against fighters of different ethnic backgrounds to return home at last in victory. It should be pointed out that both movies make «use of pre-existing foreign expectations of that to which a Thai film might refer» (Harrison 2005, 333), namely Muay Thai as a spectacle that appeals to international viewers, many of whom appreciate this sport as an important part of Thai culture promoted abroad. The objects that Ting recovers on his missions, a Buddha statue and an elephant, are also considered icons of Thainess. The deeply nationalistic storyline is, therefore, developed alongside story elements that can be considered stereotypes of the national culture.

At other times, however, *Ong-Bak* displays a kind of warm-hearted irony towards national icons. As Ting and his sidekicks run from their enemies, they are chased down narrow *sois*, back alleys teeming with a variety of Thai street life. The chase leads past food stalls, market stands, little open-air shops and passing vendors; it includes a fight on a noodle cart, stunts at an open-air backstreet garage and the use of curry paste as a defense weapon. A chase sequence later in the film features a number of Tuktuks, three-wheeled multi-colored motor rickshaws, racing each other and finally crashing off of unfinished flyovers. While the pace and quality of the action and the stunts clearly aspires to that of Hollywood action blockbusters, the setting represents an ironic nod towards everyday Thai life: the local world of small-scale backstreet business and the precarious condition of Bangkok road construction. In two shots, one can make out the sentences «Hi Spielberg, let's do it together» and «Hi Luc Besson, we are waiting for you», written in chalk and paint on a garage gate and a concrete highway pillar in the background. These messages address major players in the international film production universe; at the same time, their being written in perishable chalk and their placement in a production from a minor film nation, combined with the mentioned local feel, emphasizes the irony

of the statement. This is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that EuropaCorp, the production company of French director Luc Besson, did, in fact, purchase distribution rights for *Ong-Bak* outside Asia after the film became a hit in Thailand. EuropaCorp ultimately re-cut and re-dubbed the movie to adapt it to the taste of foreign audiences, replacing the original soundtrack with hip-hop music.



Stills from *Ong-Bak*, with inscribed messages to Luc Besson and Steven Spielberg

Another film that makes its dual nature evident is *Fah Talai Jone (Tears of the Black Tiger)*, Wisit Sasanatieng, 2000). The reception of the film has been divergent, depending on the cultural background of its audience.<sup>16</sup> *Tears of the Black Tiger* is a «riotous mélange of farcical comedy, tear-jerking melodrama, gratuitous, comic-strip violence, pop-art stage sets and traditional Thai cinematic and popular theatrical (likay) referents. And the film's repeated allusion to an assortment of Spaghetti Westerns is incongruously laced with ornamental garnishes of Buddhist fate» (Harrison 2007, 200). Above all, however, the film drew attention by virtue of its eye-catching visual design, marked by an extraordinarily vivid color scheme that was achieved by digitally enhancing almost every shot in some way. Western critics have primarily understood and interpreted the film within the framework of postmodern cultural production. In reviews, it was likened to clearly non-Thai references such as '50s swashbucklers, Hong Kong action, B-westerns and the color design of Andy Warhol's screenprints.

Thai critics, on the other hand, do not dwell on the aspect of postmodernism, but instead focus on *Tears of the Black Tiger* as an affirmation of Thainess, as it plays on nostalgia for a past era – 1950s Thailand in which most elements of the story are situated. On top of this, the film's visual style is meant to emulate the Thai action genre of the 1950. The

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<sup>16</sup> See Harrison 2007, 199ff., developing this analysis at length.

digitally faded or heightened colors and the scratchiness added in postproduction attempt to capture the present-day look of most Thai film prints from that era: due to poor archival conditions which have improved only recently, old prints have dramatically unnatural color schemes and are often seriously damaged. Seen from this point of view, «even *Tears of the Black Tiger*'s numerous references to Hollywood in general and to the spaghetti western in particular are not, as audiences beyond Thailand's borders might have it, indicators of a carnival of postmodern intertextuality, but instead refer to the appropriation of US cinema as a popular form of entertainment in 20<sup>th</sup> century Thailand» (Harrison 2007, 203). Thai 1950s action films borrowed from the iconography of the B-Western, with rural bandits clad as cowboys and riding horses. Thai critics picked up on this allusion and on the film's explicit homage to the veteran Thai director of the 1950s, Rattana Pestonji, understanding this as an appeal to the Thai nationalistic sensibility. By becoming an emblem of national cultural heritage, on the one hand, while appealing to an international viewership by its affinity to the postmodern on the other, *Tears of the Black Tiger* makes evident that films function in a different mode for a global audience than for their home audience, where they adopt a different or additional set of meanings within the local context. There is often a split between local and global screenings; while some films are successful at home, but flop abroad, others meet the opposite fate.<sup>17</sup>

As mentioned earlier, international festivals are key events for the entrance of Thai cinema into the worldwide film circuit. Culturally differing modes of viewing are an important issue here: films are usually screened for different reasons than they are shown at home, and received from a different point of view. Many festivals feature an international competition section, originally conceived as showcases for national productions.<sup>18</sup> By firmly defining the national as criteria for selection, there exists a certain tendency towards exoticism, brought forth through a viewing mode that May Adadol and Richard Llowell MacDonald call connoisseur spectatorship:

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<sup>17</sup> Another interesting example for the dual functioning of Thai films is *Suriyothai*, discussed at length by Amporn 2003.

<sup>18</sup> For a historical overview of the development of international film festivals, see Jungen 2009.



... the mere fact that a film from somewhere previously not associated with filmmaking is shown at all is regarded as cause for celebration. This is a manifestation of the postmodern sensibility in world cinema reception. What is being celebrated is simply the appearance of cultural variety; the availability of films from an ever-wider range of countries stands as an emblem of a more multicultural world. From this perspective, the merit of a foreign-language film is not derived from what it has to offer on cinematic terms; the film is a de-substantiated sign of a host culture's ability to embrace difference. (May and MacDonald 2005, 53)

The «discovery» of new national cinemas has been among the most significant developments in film over the past two decades, involving festivals and production companies, among other institutions. It is often marked by connoisseurship, a mode of viewing that places artistic orientation above pleasure and involvement. This mode is shaped by residual values that derive from the self-understanding of art cinema in postwar Europe and one of its chief concerns: to defend national cinemas against the growing dominance of Hollywood imports. From there, this viewing mode was carried forth into cultural institutions such as film festivals and world cinema distributors and exhibitors. The taste, viewing repertoire and expectations of typical art cinema audiences differ greatly from those of the popular reception mode, which focuses more on pleasure, involvement and entertainment value (May and MacDonald 2005, 50ff.). Art cinema connoisseurship values films for their significance as alternatives to Hollywood. While this might not be the only criterion of choice in every case, it certainly plays an important role. This attitude is problematic insofar as it labels world cinema as the implicit Other, objectifying it.

The fact that there exist various viewing modes helps explain the varying resonance that world cinema finds, depending on the channels and niches through which it is introduced to Western audiences. While some Thai films, such as Apichatpong's work, are known abroad mainly to festivalgoers and art-house audiences, others are appreciated mainly by popular or niche audiences. *Ong-Bak* (Prachya Pinkaew, 2003), to name one example, reached a broad mainstream audience through its theatrical and DVD releases in various countries worldwide, while its festival presence remained marginal in comparison, probably owing to its action-laden plot that was understood as being of low artistic merit.

Another problematic symptom of world cinema reception in industrialized countries is Third-Worldism, a term coined by Fredric Jameson and explained as

... the hope (...) that precapitalist societies who came to modernization only in relatively recent times would somehow be able to overleap everything crippling for the industrial West in its experience of capitalism and to move into the future with a measure of cultural originality, drawing on the existence of precapitalist and collective social relations for the invention of historically new, non-Western and non-individualistic, postcapitalistic kinds. (Jameson 1992, 186)

The primitivist perception of a non-industrialized country as pure and morally unspoilt turns it, again, into the exotic other. As May and MacDonald point out, «peripheral nations are only marginally represented in global media, their image is highly reductive. For this reason, a director upon whom international acclaim is heaped cannot avoid the burden of national representation» (May and MacDonald 2005, 52). Since few Thai names become known internationally, each of them carries a high significance as representative of Thai cinema. Thus, the national becomes a strong defining factor. Seen from here, it is obvious that self-exoticization – knowing what foreign institutions expect and modelling one's work accordingly – is at times regarded as an obvious key to success. These issues are intensified in the fields of coproduction and funding. The global financial imbalance means that the amount of capital to be invested in cinema is, in most Western countries, incomparably higher than the financial means of emerging film nations that are, therefore, on the receiving end of the cash flow. This situation creates financial dependencies: Thai films selected for or produced with financial support from the West are subject to scrutiny by investors, who, having the financial upper hand, enjoy the power to impose their ideas of Thainess or Asianness.

### **«Made in Thailand» – Ambivalence and Source of Inspiration**

The comparison between Thai and foreign products has long been a sensitive issue which Thai consumers have met with ambivalence.

In their hit song *Made in Thailand* from the early 1980s, the Thai rock band Carabao critiques the implications of the production declaration. Labelling goods with the words that make up the song's title implicitly equated them with cheap labor, lower prices and

lesser quality than imported Japanese, European or US goods, which were so expensive that the majority of Thais could not afford them. However, as Carabao point out, Thai products are often bought up wholesale, exported abroad, re-labelled and re-imported to Thailand to be sold at higher prices, becoming highly desirable because of this status upgrade.

Things have changed. Now, in the wake of the post-1997 reassessment of Thainess, «Made in Thailand» often signifies a special homegrown quality, returning to nostalgic and nationalist values. It is said with pride, implying that local products can hold their own against international ones and are not inferior. As a result of the increasing commodification, a de-referentialization of the *thai* signifier has taken place, as argued above: «Made in Thailand» has become a label, comparable to a brand. Nevertheless, underneath this rather superficial surge of self-esteem, the consensus that Thai goods are cheaper and of lower quality lives on, lending the label a kind of split personality. Market vendors at clothes stalls, for example, continue to advertise their goods as «Thai products, but made in Japan» in order to win over customers.

This continuing aura of inferiority and its contrast to the emotional value of things Thai appears in the marketing of Thai film as well. Part of the reason for the enthusiastic pride of Thai cinema in its new movies might well lie in its competitiveness with Hollywood production standards: in striving to match the glamorous look of Hollywood imports, the industry has concentrated on achieving a similarly polished, expensive-looking surface aesthetic by producing high-concept films.<sup>19</sup> As May Adadol Ingawanij writes, the elaborate set design, costumes and visual effects are frequently combined with a self-exoticising presentation of Thai cultural heritage in order to cater not only to foreign, but also to Thai audiences and to acquire national prestige; as a result, the narcissistic Thainess constructed by these productions creates a visual attraction that presents native objects as if they were foreign to achieve national prestige through Thai audiences' own, native gaze (May Adadol 2007).

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<sup>19</sup> As stated by Wyatt 1994, «high concept» film refers to a production mode that prioritises the integration of style with marketing, thus distinguishing itself by the film's image and wide marketability and relying on narrative and visual modes that conform to generic expectations.

An expanding change in awareness of mediated images of Thainess may be occurring, however. The Bangkok International Film Festival 2008 featured a special programme section called «Made in Thailand» that screens foreign productions shot in Thailand. According to programming director Pimpaka Towira, the aim of this section is to question the image that non-Thai productions convey of the country and to contrast them with national images displayed in the Thai program showcase.<sup>20</sup>

Forming a different, more marginal niche of the Thai film industry, independent or alternative productions employ a more differentiated and subtle approach to their national background and that of their work. Some of them reflect on the situation of trying to appeal to their home audience and, at the same time, finding a space in the international entertainment circuit. *Monrak Transistor* (Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 2001) does this in a joking way. As a salesman flirts with the film's heroine and invites her to a movie, she wants to know if it is a foreign or Thai film, because «Foreign actors are not as handsome». (1:24:35) References to Thainess are scattered throughout the film, up to a text insert at the very end that spells out the words «Made in Thailand».

The tension between the traditional and the modern poses an issue that has been reflected on in various aspects. *Kuen rai ngao* (*One Night Husband*, Pimpaka Towira, 2003) is a thriller that builds on the contrast between the traditional and more modern lifestyles of two Thai women. The heroine of *Tawipop* (*The Siam Renaissance*, Surapong Pinijkar, 2004) finds herself able to travel in time between the present day and the Bangkok of 1850 and finally must decide which era to live in. In *15 kham duan 11* (*Mekhong Full Moon Party*, Jeera Malikul, 2001), Khan, a young student, returns from Bangkok to his home village on the banks of the Mekong, in northeastern Thailand. It is the full moon in November, and thousands of people gather at the river to attend a yearly festival where fireballs mysteriously emerge from the water and float up to the sky. In popular belief, they are a holy offering of the Naga, the water serpent spirit, to the Buddha. Some

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<sup>20</sup> Pimpaka Towira, in a conversation with the author, August 2008. The final programme was not yet determined at the time of the conversation.

sceptical observers, however, search for a scientific explanation for the appearance of the fireballs or call it a fraud. The *luang phor* (head monk) of the village's temple on the other hand believes they are a supernatural answer to the monks' prayers. Khan discovers the origin of the fireballs and must decide whether to leave the villagers undisturbed in their beliefs or to reveal the truth behind the mystery, revealing the legend of the Naga as a lie. Independent and alternative movies frequently seem to use their rediscovered cultural roots as a source of inspiration, taking up traditions from Thai music, theater and film history and combining them with contemporary concerns. As mentioned previously, *Fah Talai Jone* (*Tears of the Black Tiger*, Wisit Sasanatieng, 2000) pays homage to Thai film history with its distinctive aesthetics and style, while the set design of *Mah Nakorn* (*Citizen Dog*, Wisit Sasanatieng, 2004) features colorful houses adorned with old Thai film posters.



Still from *Mah Nakorn*

Popular culture is an important reference point as well. Lookthung, a kind of folk music, plays a substantial role in *Monrak Transistor*, while *Fan chan* (*My Girl*, Komgrit Threewimol, Songyos Sugmakanan, Nithiwat Tharatorn, Vijja Kojew, Vithaya Thongyuyong, Adisorn Tresirikasem, 2003), a childhood tale, is reminiscent of 1980s

local pop culture. In *Kuen Phra Chan tem doueng (Isarn Special*, Mingmongkol Sonakul, 2002), the characters become protagonists of an audio soap opera, a highly popular radio genre they listen to during a long cross-country bus ride. The character parts of the broadcast are spoken by real-life soap stars, and the passengers acting them out refer to typical narrative traditions of local theater and film: improvisation and dubbing.

Storytelling traditions also form the core of *Dokfar nai mue marn (Mysterious Object at Noon*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 1999), a film that refuses to offer the viewer superficial Thai uniqueness, although Thai uniqueness may inform the deeper layers of the film's structure and atmosphere.

As Stuart Hall remarks, no single identity exists without a dialogical relationship with an Other (Hall 1999, 93). This Other is not separated from, but inherent in the Self, the identity; therefore, identity is not a fixed entity, but an ambivalent one. Identity is also formed by the relationship of the Other towards oneself. While making this statement, Hall refers to a text by Frantz Fanon that stresses the essential role of the gaze in determining the Other and the Self. The contrast between self-perception and the images of self in the foreign gaze, as well as the ambivalence that arises from this contrast, lead to the formation of identity as a constantly shifting, developing entity that is constantly negotiated by the self. From this perspective, the construction of national identity can never be isolated from global, transnational relations (Ang 1998). There are no culturally pure products: all nationalisms are hybrids, not just because they are constructed relationally with others but because they are continually staged and produced for multiple audiences, both inside and outside the national community.

It seems that Thai cinema is a sort of modular national cinema: in aiming to represent a national culture for (at least) two culturally divergent audiences at the same time, it can adapt to divergent representational sets of national belonging, each geared to a different audience expectation. It is, perhaps, these perceptive crossroads that give Thai cinema the chance to examine its complex self-image and inquire into a new understanding of itself that integrates its traditions with an involvement in the globalized entertainment world.

### **3. What Makes a Thai Movie Thai? On Film Form and Narration**

Thai cinema holds Thainess, in all its various manifestations, as a strong reference point, but also participates in the transnational flow of film culture. This element of transnationality is not a new development in Thai cinema. Foreign influences have been part of its history since its first beginnings. Among the earliest films shown in Thailand were French and Japanese silent productions. European, Japanese, Hong Kong and Indian film have been influential throughout the years, each during different eras. The USA has been widely received, especially 1950s and 1960s Hollywood, as well as US television series from the same time onwards until the present. Furthermore, transnationality has been an issue in Thai culture for centuries, influencing regional cultural forms such as the performing arts, literature and drama.

We have examined the significance of Thainess as a cultural construct, its various manifestations and implications, and the ways in which it manifests itself in the context of global cinema. This chapter now aims to inquire into film form. Local and regional as well as foreign influences appear to have been formative at various points in film history. The form of Thai cinema, like the form of any other national cinema, is a conglomerate created by the interplay and the reception of various cinematic and dramatic traditions and multiple sources. Just as there is no such thing as an essentialist Thainess, but a constructed, imagined identity formed by a discourse, it is perilous to call its formal cinematic expression «Thai», since this would imply the existence of a distinctive Thai national culture.

In this text, the term «Thai» refers to the geographical area confined by the boundaries of the present-day nation state of Thailand, and «Thai cinema» here refers to productions made within this state. Both terms are generalizations and abstractions, keeping in mind that these borders are arbitrary and that the characteristics of Thai cinema discussed in the following might well extend over the countries' geographical area and state borders, since cultural traditions are generally regional and have evolved over time through regional exchange, as can be seen on the basis of a number of dramatic forms, such as shadow puppet plays and dance drama.

While one factor in differentiating the essentialist notion of «Thai» is its regional context, another is its placement in the context of global cinema, especially in opposition to Hollywood as the globally most powerful film industry. Film theory often subsumes cinema from non-Western nations under the term World Cinema, opposing it to mainstream Hollywood film. Its film form is set in opposition to the classical narrative mode that crystallized during the era of studio filmmaking in the years around 1917-1960, the main features of which, as described by David Bordwell, are continuity editing and the illusion of linearity in time and space (Bordwell 1985, 156ff.). According to this concept, Hollywood provides the dominant model of film aesthetics and narration, to which national cinemas respond with their local vernaculars in varying modes. These modes can include resisting or opposing Hollywood and positioning themselves as the subaltern, adapting the postcolonial stance of the Other, counterbalancing it through the cultivation and state support of a national film industry, as is the case in such European countries as France, Great Britain and Denmark, and by emulating Hollywood's industry structure and developing a local film industry, based on a studio and star system as well as a local mainstream film form, as in India or Thailand. In any of these relations, Hollywood is usually seen as the center of film culture, with the national cinemas of other countries forming the periphery or semi-periphery. The interactions between these two parts is presented as unequal, with most national cinemas compromising between the Hollywood formulas and local story material.<sup>21</sup>

These assumptions, however, must be rethought in view of recent developments in the global cinematic landscape. As the culture industry becomes increasingly transnational, the flow of culture grows more multidirectional and complex. The center-periphery relation subtly shifts, as the cultural exchange varies its direction of flow. The narrational options of cinematic vocabulary are widened. Western directors expose themselves to new influences and extend their cinematic language through the reception of foreign film.

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<sup>21</sup> See Thanouli 2008, who traces this notion back to Dudley Andrew and Franco Moretti and critiques it.



Mainstream form broadens, integrating elements and styles that are distinctly different from the established classical mode that dates back to the 1960s.<sup>22</sup>

Interest in new cinematic styles has brought on an international rise of world cinema.

Various traditions have influenced Hollywood, such as the East Asian martial arts genre.

Another factor that contributes to the transnational evolvement of mainstream style is the import of foreign talent into the US film industry. Since the 1990s, Hollywood has contracted numerous foreign stars and directors with auteur status, such as Jackie Chan, Roberto Rodriguez, Alejandro Gonzales Iñárritu, Ang Lee, and the Pang Brothers.

A result of these transnational interweavings is the emergence of a new use of form that is not rooted in a single cinematic tradition, but draws inspiration from different traditions, styles and contexts (Thanouli 2008, 8). While it might be too homogenizing and normative to speak of a new narrational mode, it is obvious that narration in recent film, be it US mainstream or smaller national cinemas, is characterized by a quality of openness and stylistic flexibility that is due to exchange with other cinemas. The primacy of Western cinema in the creation of discourse is less definite. In fact, the term national cinema might become less adequate than transnational or regional cinema, due to cultural mobility.

In order to adequately discuss the multitude of transnational cultural trajectories and interweavings, world cinema should be understood as a global network of contemporary film from all countries and regions. The conventional model of center and periphery and perhaps a semi-periphery based on the dependence of other cinemas on Hollywood seems too unilateral. Rather, there exists a web of interdependence, albeit with an asymmetry formed by the market dominance of US cinema. In order to describe world cinema adequately, Eleftheria Thanouli proposes to start building a new model by employing careful descriptive analysis of systems of culture in order to understand how they work (Thanouli 2008, 14).

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<sup>22</sup> Thanouli 2008, 8ff., tracks down characteristics of evolving form in several exemplary contemporary movies. She understands these characteristics to be indicative of a new mode of «post-classical» narration, working from the term of classical narration coined by Bordwell 1985.

This chapter examines several narrative and aesthetic characteristics that appear in recent Thai cinema. Each subchapter aims to sketch the outlines of a specific characteristic, describing it and further inquiring into reasons for its appearance by tracing influences from various cinematic traditions, Thai and foreign, as well as from indigenous traditions of storytelling, drama and literature. While the formal characteristics of contemporary Thai film clearly show indigenous roots, they also are results of transcultural encounters with various geographical regions – Southeast Asian, East Asian, as well as European and North American. Research work on Thai cinema frequently reduces it to dualisms, such as Hollywood vs. indigenous, traditional vs. modern, local vs. global, and national vs. transnational. Given the wide range of transnational influences on Thai cinema, however, it seems more adequate to examine its multivocality and to think beyond an East-West divide.

In an important essay on the theorization of Southeast Asian cinema, Benjamin McKay mentions the «problem of seeing regional cinema as a reaction to or imitation of other more dominant cinematic traditions and industries – namely of course Hollywood, but also the film industries and cultures of Hong Kong, Japan and India» (McKay 2006, 3). As McKay points out, these discourses are marked by theories of Third Cinema that date back to the 1970s. Needless to say, both the world and the cinema have changed since then, a fact that calls for new discourses. According to Rachel Harrison's response to McKay's paper, one way to do this is to regard cinema of the Southeast Asian region as a hybrid product that transforms the foreign into a distinctly local cultural product (Harrison 2006, 137). Another important element, in my opinion, is the close analysis of regional or local cultural backgrounds that provide the backdrop, and often the inspiration, for the advent of cinematic forms and pragmatics, as newer forms of cultural expression that refer back on multiple levels to more familiar, pre-cinematic ones.

The characteristics are examined phenomenologically, by close observation and description of their effect on the viewer. To this end, I shall examine the narrative and aesthetic effect of exemplary sequences and focus on the interplay of form and narration, using as a background neoformalist film theory.

My aim is not to thoroughly analyse the various influences of and reasons for the appearances of the characteristics. This undertaking would far exceed the scope of this study. Rather, my goal is to point out the multitude of influences that interact over time to create an agglomeration perceived as a national cinematic style. I will also focus in particular on the way the pragmatics of film screening and viewing influence film form and style. The conditions of cultural practice, of creating and receiving culture, differ greatly according to their economic, sociocultural and political environment, and these factors account for many of the aesthetic and narrative choices made by filmmakers. For this reason, I aim to study specific elements of film form as artistic phenomena, in order, wherever possible, to situate them in their political and social contexts. In this way, I hope to gain insight into the inner workings of the films and the historical practices and norms that shape them. The characteristics discussed in this chapter appear in Thai mainstream, semi-independent, and independent films alike. Their meanings vary, however, according to the production contexts, the films' intentions and target audiences. These factors shall be taken into consideration as well. How do different production conditions vary in their handling of given norms and the constraints they impose on filmmakers?

The consideration of a widely set, pragmatic framework helps to develop a larger picture, moving from the appearance of recent Thai film to questions about implications of its form. As Elizabeth Buck and Aihwa Ong comment, film is shaped by economic and by power relations (Ong 1999 and Buck 1992). Not only is Thai cinema embedded in the global film industry, but, as the previous chapter has shown, the ensuing web of connections leaves traces in the films' contents and appearance on multiple levels. As such, this text is a study in transcultural perspective, rather than a detailed historicization of Thai cinema.

I cannot stress enough that these characteristics are not definitive, but descriptive and preliminary; as such, they form a point of departure shaped by impressions, rather than a definitive, exhaustive result or statement. Description in itself seems a legitimate aim, especially since little in-depth research currently exists on the subject of Thai film form.

Therefore, this chapter is an attempt to stake out the terrain and recognize paths, without fixing them in place. As these paths are based on observations and recurring experiences while viewing, they are subject to selective perception and do not claim to be the last word on this topic.

### 3.1 Retelling Stories

This chapter focuses on the subject of Thai mainstream cinema's story material and its tendency towards retelling. What stories do the films feature? What is their subject matter? Which of them are repeatedly told, how are the various versions handled, and what are the relations between them? How does the handling of story matter reflect the notion of what a story is and which values are ascribed to it?

July 1999 saw the Thai release of *Nang Nak* (Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999). The ghost movie cost 12 million baht and went on to make 150 million, becoming one of the highest-grossing box office hits in Thai film history (Williamson 2005). *Nang Nak* is based on the Thai legend *Mae Nak Prakhanong*, which tells the story of Mak, a young man who leaves his home in the village of Prakhanong, to fight a war with the Burmese. During his absence, his wife Nak dies in childbirth. After Mak's return, they continue to live together as a family, until Mak realizes that his wife is a ghost: So strong was her love that her spirit refuses to leave her husband even after death. Mak is terrified and flees to the temple of Wat Mahabut, where Nak cannot enter to the holy area. She then frightens the people of Phra Khanong in her anger at them for helping Mak to leave her. Soon thereafter, she is exorcised. *Mae Nak Prakhanong* is probably Thailand's most popular ghost legend; almost everyone is familiar with it, and Nak's shrine, purportedly her burial site in Prakhanong, now in Bangkok, is a popular place of worship. Her story has been told and retold countless times and in various forms, from simple storytelling over a *likay* play in the reign of King Rama VI (1910-1925) to comic books, radio shows, television drama and the opera *Mae Nak* (2003) by Thai composer Sontow Sucharitkul. There have been numerous film adaptations since the silent era, including animated versions, some of them blockbusters (Wong 2004, 124ff.).

From a Western point of view, it might appear remarkable that a film based on such a well-known tale would be a great success, since the plot development and the ending are clear from the start. It was hardly the novelty of the story that attracted the audience; on the contrary, familiarity was one of the selling points. Another element that added to its success was the high production value that lent the popular legend an adequate

resplendence. The historical settings and costumes were carefully researched and crafted to achieve an authentic look of Thai life in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Digital effects present the story's fantastic elements in a spectacular and visually stunning way, and the use of color filters and high-end lighting gives the film a glossy, glamorized, refined look. Thus, the legend's status as a cornerstone of popular culture is affirmed and reinforced. *Nang Nak*, as May Adadol Ingawanij points out, is a key example of the Thai heritage film: commercial movies, produced by majors for mass audiences, screened in cineplexes and designed to achieve high box office returns, that celebrate subject matter from the repertory of national legacy, presenting Thainess as a visual attraction, designed with an emphasis on high production values and as a consumer item marketed to a middle-class spectatorship (May Adadol 2007, 180). A significant part of the group of heritage films is comprised of *nang yon yuk*, the period films that boomed after 1997 and usually retell popular segments of well-known stories. These films generally display conservative, traditionalist ideology, reperforming and fortifying Thainess and its pillars: the nation, Buddhism and the monarchy.

*Nang Nak*'s moral is in line with that of the legend's Buddhist dimension: even though Nak's love is so strong that she wishes to bridge the gap between life and death, she ultimately must relinquish her beloved. By doing so, she restores order between the realms of the living and the dead by forsaking her desire. Emotions must not be followed blindly, but should be overcome when they are unreasonable and might harm the natural order of things. The female character with supernatural powers thus represents the bodily and the emotionally excessive, expressing itself as domesticity and motherhood that have become overpowering and possessive. This excessive femininity must be exorcised to restore safety in the community. An important part of the portrayal of Nak is, however, that her fate is pitiable, and calls forth empathy alongside fear.

### **Revisiting the Familiar: Adaptations of Legends, Myths and Literature to Film**

While recent Thai films cover a wide variety of stories and styles, it is striking how often they refer to familiar story material. Often, these are folkloric myths and legends, as in the case of *Nang Nak*. Ghost stories, *nang phii*, are highly popular; while they form a

whole cinematic genre of their own, many of them retell well-known ghost legends, such as *Krasue* (Bin Bunluerit, 2002), the story of a female ghost who has the form of a woman's head with entrails attached to it, and who pursues innocent victims at night. The character of Krasue is so popular that it has become something of a pop cultural icon.

Other examples for films based on well-known ghost or spirit tales are *Mae Bia* (*Snake Lady*, Somching Srisuparp, 2001), a romance/horror movie about a woman who lives in a symbiotic relationship with a vicious cobra that kills her suitors, and *Lorn* (*Soul*, Apichat Popairoj, 2003), an episodically structured film which tells four traditional ghost tales, each from a different region of Thailand.

Legends with a religious context have been adapted to film as well. *Angulimala* (Sutape Tunnirut, 2003) tells the story of an important figure in early Thai Buddhism, an outlaw and mass murderer who finds redemption by conversion to Buddhism after a chance meeting with the Buddha. His story is seen as an example of the redemptive power of the Buddha's teaching and the universal human potential for spiritual progress. Another recent example, *Life of the Buddha* (*Phra Phuttajao*, Wallapa Pimthong, 2007) is an animated feature film about the life of Buddha, based on the Pali Canon, a collection of scriptures.

Another frequent source of inspiration are well-known literary works. Many of them belong to the genre of literary mythology; the movies that result are thus related in genre, tone and content to film adaptations of legends, often focusing on fantastic, mysterious and mythical story elements. A prominent example is the mythological fantasy film *Phra Apai Manee* (Chalart Sriwanna, 2003), based on a verse epic by the 19<sup>th</sup> century poet Sunthorn Phu about the adventures of two princes. Similarly, *Kunpan* (*Legend of the Warlord*, Tanit Jitnukul, 2002) is a period epic based on the classic folktale *Khun Chang Khung Phaen* about the life of a warrior. *Krai Thong* (Suthat Intaranupakorn, 2001), another fantasy film, is about the coexistence of humans and godlike spirits, featuring the superhuman hero Krai Thong who confronts a giant crocodile that has the power to turn into a human being.

The supernatural and the fantastic are recurrent genres, in line with the mythical, animist and spiritual elements of popular stories. The abundance of myths, legends and folklore in popular Thai literature is reflected in Thai cinema. Seen from the outside, this particular branch of Thai cinema appears as a vast body of tales, a story world of its own, unfamiliar to outsiders. Seen from the inside, it provides a rich visualization of the mythological and spiritual world that form a substantial part of Thai culture, thus affirming the ideology of the nation. Here the principle of community plays an important role. Knowing that these films are highly recognizable to a Thai audience, but hardly to foreign viewers, enhances the feeling of belonging to a nation and affirms citizenship. Thus, retelling a story becomes an act of reconfirming nationhood.

Thai storytelling practice traditionally builds on the principle of community and the familiar. Stories create and define groups: they are passed on by oral narration, told in the home and at school, and form a collective, social experience linking generations. For adults, traditional stories are often carriers of childhood memories, bound to family members and teachers, and associated with the familiar and communal.

Recent development has brought an individualization of entertainment. Especially in urban spaces, solitary forms of story reception, such as reading books, watching DVDs, and using the internet, are as common nowadays as in more highly industrialized countries. To a certain extent, de-oralization has taken place, linked with the advent of consumer culture and the capitalist control of the entertainment market that shifts the role of the storyteller from elders, friends and relatives to books, DVDs and the like.

However, storylines, structures and motifs from traditional tales can still be traced in recent drama and in film. As Annette Hamilton writes:

In Thai popular tradition, as is the case in most of Asia, repetition of a familiar theme is part of narrative pleasure, and in films the pleasure is doubled if the same cast appears in the same kind of story. Furthermore, while these stories are set in modern times, elements of them can be interpreted through much older narrative forms: Thai classical literature, traditional tales based on the Ramayana, tales of the lives of the Buddha, and *likay* popular folk drama, provide echoes in the modern drama, and the intertextual framework of audience interpretation. What differentiates the modern drama, however, is the complexity of the issues underlying the moral stance and final outcome of the plot. In traditional narratives, the conflicting elements are well known and their outcomes are entirely predictable: in the modern drama, the circumstances of modernity themselves



impose unexpected and unlikely possibilities, and different possible outcomes. (Hamilton 1992, 264)

The term «modern drama» in this context probably refers to the postwar Thai drama. Generally, the period from 1850 onwards is understood as the onset of modernity in Thailand, as Westernization and technologization became an important part of state policy during the reigns of King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn. In this context, it is crucial to remark that modernity does not mean a homogeneous, purely Western-oriented movement, but rather one of various local forms, in which the traditional continues to exist alongside specifically Thai developments and implementations of modernity. As Arjun Appadurai has described, modernity is global and multiple, established by the practices of local subjects in specific neighborhoods (Appadurai 1996). Thus, modernity as it is reflected in postwar Thai drama with new subject matters is a specifically local manifestation that incorporates local literary traditions and motifs.

There exists a corresponding tendency in contemporary Thai film to return to and retell familiar stories even when newer, modern elements come into play. Other types of familiar subject matter, besides the aforementioned mythical and legendary ones, are adaptations of novels, real-life incidents and biographies of well-known personalities.

Novels are a more recent appearance in Thai literature. The concept of the novel is fairly recent, stemming from translations of English novels that were introduced at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first native Thai novels were written in the 1920s (Manich 2000(2), 174ff).

Film adaptations of novels are common. *Khang lang phab* (*Behind the Mirror*, Cherd Songsri, 2001) was based on a romantic novel written in the 1920s by Siburapha. The tragic romance *Khwan-riam* (Suthakorn Santathiwat, 2001) was based on the literary classic *Phlae Kao* by Mai Muang Doem.

Adaptations are mainly made of Thai novels, although these are sometimes adaptations themselves. The film *Phai Daeng* (*Red Bamboo*, Permpol Cheuyarun, 1980), for example, was based on the novel of the same name by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, a leading literary figure of post-war Thailand and former prime minister. The novel and film, in

turn, are Thai-rendered free adaptations of the Italian author Giovanni Guareschi's stories of Don Camillo.

Just as popular as films based on legends and myths are those based on histories and biographies. While portraits of historical state leaders, such as Chatri Chalerm Yukol's *Suriyothai* (2001) and *Naresuan* (2007), are related to legend and myth adaptations in their significance for the nation's self-image, biographies of lowlier persons are popular as well. Some examples: *2499 Antapan Krong Muang (Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters*, Nonzee Nimibutr, 1997) recreates the life of the notorious 1950s gangster Daeng. *Satree Lex (Iron Ladies*, Yongyooth Tongkongthoon, 2000) tells the story of a gay volleyball team's rise to fame, and *Beautiful Boxer* (Ekachai Uekrongtham, 2003) is about the male-to-female transgender Thai boxer and model Nong Toom Parinya. All these characters have been prominent in recent popular culture.

As is the case with movies based on myths and legends, the biopics and films based on real-life incidents gain their attraction through their familiarity to the audience. Viewers know the general outline of the story and enjoy the subtle variations that make up the essence of the retelling. The movie might, for instance, feature cutting-edge CGI effects or the stars of the moment; the plot may have been constructed in a new way or the story updated.

### **Remakes and Re-Remakes**

Besides the retelling of familiar contents, remakes – the cinematic equivalent of retelling – are strikingly frequent. Often, an original film is remade several times. Among recent cinematic re-remakes are, for example, the previously mentioned *Mae Bia*, which is the second remake of a film adapting a Thai novel, or *Phra Apai Manee*, preceded by Thailand's first animated feature *Sud Sakorn (The Adventures of Sud Sakorn*, Payud Ngaokrachang, 1979), both based on Sunthorn Phu's epic. *Krai Thong* is based on a folktale that was given its written form by King Rama II (1768-1824) and previously made into a feature film in 1980. The classic novel *Phlae Kao* has served as a starting

point for the 1977 movie of the same name by Cherd Songsri, which was internationally acclaimed and remade into *Kwan-Riam* in 2001.

Just as cinematic adaptations of literature mostly choose Thai works, remakes almost always are based on local originals. And as is the case with the aforementioned films based on legends, myths and literary works, Thai remakes usually remain true to their original in content, plot, style, narration, and ideology. Shifts in interpretation are rare, and radical changes in meaning hardly ever occur.

The film *Phra Apai Manee* tells the tale of the prince Apai Manee, and is in keeping with the original verse epic as well as the fantastical approach of its animated predecessor from the 1970s. At that time, the depiction of giants was made possible by drawing animation; in the latest version, digital special effects are used to render supernatural and fantastic elements. As Jochen Manderbach points out, innovations in film technology often cause a wave of remakes, as the new possibilities of the medium are welcomed and swiftly put to use (Manderbach 1988). The appearance of CGI effects at the turn of the millenium is especially appealing for the fantasy and ghost genre and helps explain the popularity of its remakes: computer effects enable the depiction of the supernatural in a novel way that enhances the illusion that the fantastic really exists. The aforementioned ghost film *Krasue* takes full advantage of this possibility, showing long sequences of the ghost flying around nocturnal villages with its entrails fluttering, accompanied by swishing sounds.

What do audiences expect of a remake? Jochen Manderbach describes the cornerstones of a remake as the adoption of the story from an original and the analogy to this original regarding plot structure and groupings of characters. These traits form the limits of a remake's creative freedom and render it recognizable as a remake. The acceptance and appreciation of a remade film depends on the balance between staying in line with the original and the introduction of new, contemporary elements. While Manderbach's general maxims accurately apply to Thai remakes, these show an additional concern regarding alignment with their originals and hardly deviate from them. Major creative changes are rare. It is usually the historical relation of the story towards its audience that

shifts: between the original or the last version of the film and its remake, time passes, and society changes along with its structures, norms and values.

*Khvam rak krang suthai* (*Last Love*, Chattri Chalerm Yukol, 1975) is a love story that was remade by the same director in 2003. The remake does not make significant changes in story, plot or narration; its point of interest lies in the time span between the original and the second version of the movie. It is about a single mother in her mid-thirties who has a love affair with a much younger man. In Thailand in 1975, this was regarded as radical and scandalous. Since then, society has become more tolerant and its moral concepts less strict; the question that interested the filmmaker was how this would change the situation of the characters in the 2003 version.<sup>23</sup>

Strong shifts in ideology usually call forth resistance, as is illustrated by the example of a remake that viewed as too innovative. *Tawipop* (*The Siam Renaissance*, Surapong Pinijkhar, 2004) is based on a novel from the 1980s. The story of a young Thai woman who travels back and forth between the present and the past – the kingdom of Siam during the reign of King Rama V – had been made into a television movie and several stage plays. The 2004 version changes the present time of the plot, situated in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in all previous versions, to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The story thus becomes a contemporary one, and its issues of nationhood and politics gain an up-to-date twist, making allusions to Thailand's questions of cultural and economic independency amidst globalization at the turn of the millennium. The post-1997 cry for national values is paralleled with Thailand's struggle for independence during the colonialist era. Press commentary found the film too liberal with its original and too progressive in its treatment of Thai history, and attributed the film's poor box office performance to these factors. Besides, one critic commented, a period movie would have been more spectacular, heightening the opportunities for escapism (Parinyaporn 2005). In 2005, the novel was adapted into a stage musical that remained more in line with the literary original and drew a large audience.

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<sup>23</sup> See the director's comment on his film in an interview with Kong Rithdee (Kong 2003).

*Mae Nak* by Pimpaka Towira (1998) is an experimental short that rewrites the Mae Nak legend. Pimpaka reinterprets the tale from the point of view of Mae Nak's character, the female ghost, instead of the original point of view of the frightened villagers. This change of perspective shifts the focus from the fearful, fantastical and moralizing elements of the tale towards a strong empathy with the ghost, expressing her situation and her feelings in lyrical images. *Mae Nak* deviates broadly from the original tale and the previous film versions. While rarely screened in a commercial context, it was successful at festivals, Thai as well as foreign, that show experimental, artistic, noncommercial and independent work and operate by different audience expectations than the Thai mainstream. *Mae Nak* belongs in the context of cinematic subculture and the avant-garde, and thus finds its audience mainly in circles that are interested in alternatives to popular, commercial mainstream Thai cinema.

Generally, the more mainstream a film is, and the more influential major studios were in its production process, the stronger it correlates to the official ideology of Thainess. Alternatives exist to the main channels of film production. Since they employ different distribution systems, screening venues and cultural circuits, however, they reach different audiences than their mainstream counterparts. While mainstream productions circulate in what might be called official, formal Thai cinematic culture, independent film is made and often shown in a more casual, semi-public sphere. The dividing line between the two is usually palpable and clearly set.

### **The Value of the Past and the Pragmatics of Film Conservation**

The subject of remakes is closely linked with the relation of a culture to its past: What does «old» signify? What value do old artefacts have? How do new ones relate to them? The cultural understanding of aging and old objects sheds light on the manner in which these objects are regarded and handled, and vice versa.

Compared to other art media, the status of film in Thailand is low. Among the high arts are courtly forms of dance, drama, music and architecture; folk arts, like popular forms of theatre, dance and music, as well as handicrafts, are lower in status. The latter forms have, however, been enjoying greater appreciation since the tourist influx: their attraction

to foreign eyes has raised a general awareness of their significance as national cultural practices, as well as their marketability. By way of the propagating and marketing of Thainess, they have become assets of nationhood. Yet cinema does not belong to either category. As a media, its history is too recent, its character too technological for it to be considered a serious art.

Furthermore, its emergence in Thailand is connected with the West, lending film the connotation of being something at least partially foreign. Since the traditional Thai understanding of art is linked with heritage and thus national importance, imported art forms, such as abstract art and modern dance, have a kind of outsider status. Thai recipients admire US cinema for its production quality and polished appearance, and certain educated and elite circles prize European films for their artistic and avant-garde structure. Thai cinema, meanwhile, is of lower status than foreign film, since it is taken for granted fact that Thai cinema cannot equal or surpass the quality of foreign cinema.

Thai cinema is considered entertainment, not art or culture. A film is an object for consumption with a short life span, cast away after use. It is enjoyed for a fleeting moment in time and not expected to provide anything longer-lasting than its screening duration, except perhaps a pleasurable memory of being entertained. Quick consumption is followed by quick production of new films, not conceived for the long run, but for the taste of the season, soon to be followed by the next hit. From early on, and especially in the 1950s and 1960s, the Thai film industry was built for mass production, churning out movie after movie, each more or less following the schemata of genre formulas. The understanding of cinema was as pure business, not art.

Since the manufacturing prints was expensive, only one or a small number of copies were made of each film. These prints were then screened and re-screened, traveling from cinema to cinema, from urban audiences to rural ones. Since celluloid prints are delicate and wear out with repeated screening, heavily-used prints soon fell to pieces after being exhibited around the country. By the end of their theatrical run, they were in poor shape (Dome 1993). Since no prints were archived, the majority of Thai films made before 1970 are now lost. What remained of prints after screening soon deteriorated due to poor

storage conditions and the tropical climate.<sup>24</sup> Because of the general lack of interest in archiving and conserving films, financial means are nonexistent or scarce at best. Instead of conserving the old prints, new films were shot, following a similar pattern or directly remaking previous films. This production practice goes hand in hand with the artistically and politically conservative attitude of the Thai mainstream film industry of rigidly reproducing formulaic, escapist entertainment, with little interest in change. In addition, censorship made any overly progressive ideology a risk. Remakes were also often made for commercial reasons, drawing on the market value of previously successful films and adding additional attractions like star value. If something had been a box office success earlier, chances were larger the audience would respond well to a remake.<sup>25</sup> Remakes assuredly draw attention to their original, lending it value and confirming its quality: the original version must implicitly be of interest, since it inspired a new rendition. Yet Thai audiences rarely watch original versions, in part because they are difficult to access. Old films might exist only as fragments, are forgotten to everyone except film experts, or are sometimes simply lost. Some classics have recently been made available on DVD, such as films from the 1960s featuring the best-known Thai stars of that era, Mittr and Petchara, and the work of iconic directors like Ratana Pestonji or Chatrri Chalerm Yukol. However, the range of movies published on DVD covers only a fraction of Thai film history. Even when transferred to the new medium, the poor quality of the original print is evident: scratches, fading color and continuity gaps caused by missing footage are transferred onto the digital media.

The Thai National Film Archive, founded in 1981 and led by Dome Sukwong, does invaluable work in the preservation of film. As the only film archive in the country, it

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<sup>24</sup>More than 3000 features have been produced in Thailand since 1923. All of the 20 silent feature films made between 1923 and 1932 have been lost. Between 1932 and 1939, 50 sound films were made, of which only a few survive. Since 1970, Thailand has produced an average of 120 films per year in color, 35mm and CinemaScope, all of which have been preserved (Dome 1989).

<sup>25</sup> According to Manderbach 1988, this is a general motivation behind the conception of remakes, and one that accounts for the bad image they sometimes have: Often, remakes are associated with low creativity and a dearth of attractive new scripts, as well as profit-oriented productions.

collects and restores old prints, working under difficult circumstances, including limited financial resources, sparse government funding, limited storage space, and a tropical climate in which celluloid tends to deteriorate faster than under moderate conditions. The Archive started out by gathering film prints from old movie theaters, and later from distributors and filmmakers, starting in Bangkok and progressing to rural areas. The Archive collects feature, documentary and independent movies as well as films made by government organizations, covering the whole range of Thai productions. Many movies are preserved as VHS copies, a media that ages rapidly and loses quality over time.

The Thai Film Museum, in conjunction with the Film Archive, exhibits historical objects such as posters, programmes, ticket stubs, costumes, props, set decorations, and the like. Occasionally, it screens old prints in a charming viewing room, built in the style of an old movie hall. Some of the few other opportunities to view old films are retrospectives held at festivals, such as that for Ratana Pestonji at the Bangkok International Film Festival in 2004.

New versions hardly cause a revival of the older or original versions for other reasons as well. Novelty is generally highly valued, and the latest version is often regarded as the best and most interesting, simply by virtue of being the newest. Its newness further enhances the status of the story, proving its ongoing significance and popularity. It is only recently that an interest in film history and an awareness of the historicity of the medium has developed, based on the gradually growing accessibility of old films on DVD and at retrospectives.

Cultural connotations of what «old» means differ greatly. For example, a common experience of Western tourists to East and Southeast Asia is the astonishment when visiting historical temples and palaces that are claimed to be centuries old, while in fact they are almost totally renovated or even reconstructed replica of the original buildings. The fact that, say, a specific Laotian temple dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century just doesn't seem reconcilable with its having been rebuilt very recently and looking brand-new. In European thinking, the appreciation of historical cultural objects is largely bound to the experience of confronting originals, real physical objects from the past. Patina plays an important role: the fading colors of frescos, the peeling walls of ancient architecture



signify the originality of the aged object, the marks time has left upon it and its physical presence throughout the centuries. In Southeast Asia, by contrast, the importance of historical objects lies less in their physicality than in their significance as stemming from the past. They represent the past and its meaning, even if they are not necessarily physically old. The upkeep of ancient buildings, making them look new, is a sign of reverence: maintenance signifies respect. The physical structures of the buildings are a sort of carrier for the historical, cultural, and religious significance that inhabits the site like a sort of spirit and is not bound to the material existence of the original building. The underlying concept of history and historicity understands time as circular, rather than progressive: history repeats itself. While material objects are fully recognized as transient, the eternal manifests itself in values and beliefs and is continuously mediated by traditions. These form a continuity that carries the past onwards into the present, counteracting the transience and perishability of things; thus, it is the meaning attributed to things, not their ephemeral existence, that is of importance. Traditions are passed on over generations, between persons; cultural practices exist and live on solely in their enactment by their practitioners.

Applied to cinematic renditions of stories and to old films, this means that while a tale itself remains important and is reproduced nearly unchanged, its old, out-of-date, timeworn medial carrier calls for an updated, renovated, polished version. Its patina is not so much admired and cherished. Instead, it indicates a need for renewal.

While cinema may not be respected in the same way as traditional cultural forms, remaking traditional tales is a form of passing on values and can be seen as related, if at a distance, to the notion of paying respect to heritage.<sup>26</sup> Retelling is not a practice concerned with exact historicizing so much as it is about affirming the underlying eternal truth – the moral or spiritual message – of a story. The concept of remaking is undoubtedly inspired in large measure by Hollywood. Yet the notion of retelling seems deeply ingrained in local culture nonetheless.

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<sup>26</sup> Mariann Lewinsky Sträuli makes similar points regarding the handling of old film prints and the concept of remakes in Japan. See Lewinsky 1997, 79ff.

### **Multi-Adaptations and the Early Retelling of Film in Print Media**

Another form of retelling, closely related to the tendency towards remaking, is a practice I will call «multi-adapting»: the adaptation of a story to a different media, often repeatedly. Literature is made into films, which are turned into stage plays, musicals, operas, or vice versa, in every imaginable combination. In Thai entertainment practice, it is common for stories to transgress media. The popularity and commercial success of a play, literary work, or film is quickly seen as an opportunity for readaptation. Once again, the shifts in the choice of media mostly occur without major changes to the essence of the stories. As in the case of cinematic remakes, differences between originals and new versions are slight and occur for the most part in the choice of star value, production quality, and up-to-date technology, and more rarely on the levels of content, style, narration and ideology. As before, the original stories chosen for multi-adapting are usually formulaic tales that convey a conservative ideology in line with ideologies of the state and religion.

While it is common for film adaptations worldwide to be based on literature, stage plays, or musicals, the exchange between film and other media has worked both ways in Thai practice. A distinctive feature of Thai film history is the issuing of film booklets, small leaflets containing a written version of a film screened in the cinema. The early form of this practice began in the 1920s, when magazines and newspapers began to publish cinema programmes, comments and stories retold from Western films and plays, which had just begun to appear in Thailand. These stories, written in Thai language, were issued principally for commercial reasons and aimed to satisfy Thai cinemagoers who did not understand English, the predominant language of the Western entertainment shown in Thailand. These programmes, comments and stories soon became popular and were read for pleasure; their success led to the publication of numerous similar magazines as well as a substantial expansion of Thai audiences for foreign-language films and plays.<sup>27</sup> In response, cinemas began to print small story booklets for each film. They were available

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<sup>27</sup> Among the earliest magazines that featured retold versions of foreign films were *Phapayon Siam* (1920-24) and *Nangsue Phim Khao Lakhon Pramote Nakorn*. An important effect of these publications was to expand the reading public. See Wibha 1975, 44ff. and 67.

at the box office and became a profitable business. Remarkably, the written retold versions of the films were not based on the scripts, but on the booklet authors' viewing experience, in other words on their own personal readings of the films. Although these booklets are similar to the novel tie-ins that have become part of modern-day blockbuster marketing strategies, they originated at an earlier stage in film history, from the desire to understand foreign cinema (Chalida 2001, 123).

Writing film booklets became the starting point for the career of many Thai authors and journalists, as it provided them with learning experiences and an income. The effect of Western film on the early development of the Thai novel and the rise of journalism, both of which originated at this period of history, is substantial (Wibha 1975, 67).

After World War II, the film industry was creatively and financially run down. The demand for new films was high, but there was a shortage of talent, script material and technical equipment. To survive, producers made up for the poor quality of their productions by imitating successful films, sometimes to the point of reusing titles. They also borrowed from plots of popular radio dramas and magazine stories (Lent 1990, 213). Despite their low status in some Western notions of artistic value, borrowing, adaptation and imitation are not proof of unoriginality in the Thai context, but rather honorable means to interpret admired originals and aspire to the excellence of idolized figures. The essential importance of authorship lies not in the author as the creator of the original so much as in the treatment of the story material and the craftsmanship that makes it outstanding. A traditional story is employed as a sort of free-floating base of material, and authorship becomes meaningful primarily through the refined handling of this material. The notion of copyright is less prevalent than in Western thought, where artistic originality is regarded as morally sacrosanct and is afforded legal protections.

### **The Influence of Orality**

The questions raised as to retelling, remaking, the handling of cultural history and the status of authorship lead back to the strong influence of orality on Thai cultural traditions. Orality can be defined as a way of thinking and its verbal expression in societies where

the technologies of literacy, especially writing and print, are unfamiliar to most of the population. According to Walter Ong, an oral culture follows different psychodynamics and shows different characteristics than a culture with literacy. These characteristics do not abruptly change with the emergence of literacy: «Oral formulaic thought and expression ride deep in consciousness and the unconscious, and they do not vanish as soon as one used to them takes pen in hand» (Ong 1982, 26). Oral habits continue to form the style of written literature for varying amounts of time; some modern cultures that have known writing for centuries have never fully interiorized it and evidence, in Ong's term, residual orality. This phenomenon usually diminishes as a culture continues to interiorize the technologies of literacy.

The current literacy rate in Thailand is 94%.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, present-day Thailand is a culture significantly marked by residual orality, especially in rural areas. Traditional written culture was a privilege enjoyed by a restricted, educated group; book culture was introduced only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the first printing press was set up in 1851 (Chetana 2007). Both religious and secular knowledge, on the one hand, and traditional forms of entertainment, on the other, are based on a culture of oral communication. Drama texts, epics, folk tales and song lyrics were rarely recorded in writing, but rather passed on orally over generations, from teacher to pupil or from the old to the young, a practice that remains remarkably present even today. Direct human contact is still an important aspect of communication. For this reason, orality is also a crucial background factor for the mode of expression of audiovisual media in present-day Thailand, as traces of characteristics of orality can be found in Thai cinema.

As an important characteristic of oral culture in general, stories are passed on rather than invented anew. Since oral storytelling has to rely on memory and cannot refer to texts stored in written form, the conservation of the storytelling heritage must be carefully tended. Innovation of story material is far less important than it is in written culture. In fact, it is imperative to repeat and renew existing stories to preserve them in cultural memory.

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<sup>28</sup> According to UNICEF, this is the total adult literacy rate for 2000-2007. See [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/Thailand\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/Thailand_statistics.html), retrieved April 21, 2009.

As Walter Ong writes, oral cultures and cultures with high oral residue tend towards redundancy. Knowledge must be repeated so that it can be conserved, since repetition aids memory and focus:

Thought requires some sort of continuity. Writing establishes in the text a «line» of continuity outside the mind. If distraction confuses or obliterates from the mind the context out of which emerges the material I am now reading, the context can be retrieved by glancing back over the text selectively. (...) The mind concentrates its own energies on moving ahead because what it backloops into lies quiescent outside itself, always available piecemeal on the inscribed page. In oral discourse, the situation is different. There is nothing to backloop into outside the mind, for the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered. Hence, the mind must move ahead more slowly, keeping close to the focus of attention much of what it has already dealt with. Redundancy, repetition of the just-said, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track. (Ong 1982, 39)

The role of storyteller is that of an entertainer as well as of a conservator of knowledge. He usually figures more prominently than the author of an oral text, as the author is often hard to discern, as in the case of folk tales or myths, or is not remembered by name at all. Oral culture is also strongly community-forming: the recipients gather round the speaker, as teaching or storytelling must essentially be «live», bound to the voice of the speaker which cannot be conserved. The rendition of oral texts often occurs on special occasions uniting the community, frequently in connection with such ritualizations as festivals, rites, and religious occasions.

Another psychodynamic of orality suggested by Ong is a conservative attitude to experimentation with knowledge:

Since in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation. Knowledge is hard to come by and precious, and society regards highly those wise old men and women who specialize in conserving it, who know and can tell the stories of the days of old. (Ong 1982, 41)

This tendency offers insight into why Thai retold stories usually remain so close to their original. By doing so, they keep in line with a culture of respect towards elders and authorities. The tendency towards conservativist attitudes comes with an important political implication: preexisting structures and ideologies are easily reinforced, as they are infrequently questioned or openly criticized. The fortification of traditionalist values,

for example affirmations of the nation propagated in a specific way by the state, is upheld with little resistance – hence, perhaps, the appreciation for nation-building contents in Thai historical epic films.

Another base characteristic is the additive, rather than subordinative, treatment of thought and expression. Texts marked by orality frequently show the structure of simple sentences joined serially by «and», as opposed to texts from literate cultures, which tend to evolve toward the use of compound sentences as well as subordinative and analytic structures.<sup>29</sup> The syntactical organization of main sentences linked with «and» is similar to the structure of plotlines that consist of loosely linked episodes forming a non-hierarchically structured sequence of events.

In orality, it is the narrative that creates coherence, rather than the structural organization of the text, which is the source of coherence in written discourse. As mentioned in the previous chapter, oral rendition of discourse calls for forms that are easily memorized – namely, mnemonic forms such as additions, redundancy, repetitions, fixed attributes, stanzas and general formulas. This also has effects on the oral narrative plot, which tends towards epic length and episodic structure, as opposed to the climactic linear plots typical in written discourse. The memory of the bard, poet or storyteller who produces the discourse in a culture of orality functions less by way of a strict linear presentation of events than by themes and formulas he has heard others tell or sing (Ong 1982, 139ff.).

A further characteristic of oral culture is the use of aggregative discourse: its elements tend to have the shape of clusters, such as parallel terms or phrases or clauses, or epithets. This type of expression is highly formulaic and often uses standard attributions: the beautiful princess, the evil stepmother, the brave hero, and so forth. The attribute is constant and repeatedly bound to the character, in some texts at every mention.

Aggregative discourse thus reproduces and reinforces stereotypes and formulaic thought. By nature, the aggregative discourse characteristic to orality corresponds to the formulaicism of Thai genre cinema and to its stereotypical characters, echoing the oral

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<sup>29</sup> Ong 1982, 35ff. According to Ong, written discourse organizes itself in more elaborate and fixed grammar than oral discourse does, because to provide meaning, it depends more upon linguistic structure; in oral discourse, meaning is co-determined by the context of the discourse's creation.

residue in contemporary Thai culture. As such, it is opposed to analytical discourse that aims to singularize and to differentiate the quality of what it describes.

While oral culture might question the attributes assigned to an entity, this is done so as to keep the aggregate intact, not to doubt it. As Ong points out:

Traditional expressions in oral cultures must not be dismantled: it has been hard work getting them together over the generations, and there is nowhere outside the mind to store them. So soldiers are brave and princesses beautiful and oaks sturdy forever. This is not to say that there may not be other epithets for soldiers or princesses or oaks, even contrary epithets, but these are standard, too: the braggart soldier, the unhappy princess, can also be part of the equipment. What obtains for epithets obtains for other formulas. Once a formulary expression has crystallized, it had best be kept intact. Without a writing system, breaking up thought – that is, analysis – is a high-risk procedure. (Ong 1982, 38)

### **Retelling and the Updating of Stories**

In several aspects, orality shows parallels with the preference of Thai cinema for cinematic retelling and remakes, namely, the tendency toward repetition and retelling, the prominent status of the storyteller, and the tendency to conservatism and closeness of retold versions to original texts. This might partly explain its characteristic handling of authorship and copyright, as well as the popular practices of imitation and adaptation. Cinematic retelling, in all its different manifestations, can be understood as a sort of regional modern-day, technologized remainder from orality.

This naturally does not mean that innovation is impossible in oral cultures. The options for originality are on a different level, however: the appeal of a retold tale lies in the relation of the storyteller to the audience and in the slight shifts and variations that creative freedom allows the storyteller to make to the original:

Of course oral cultures do not lack originality of their own kind. Narrative originality lodges not in making up new stories but in managing a particular interaction with this audience at this time – at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation, for in oral cultures an audience must be brought to respond, often vigorously. But narrators also introduce new elements into old stories. In oral tradition, there will be as many minor variants of a myth as there are repetitions of it, and the number of repetitions can be increased indefinitely. Praise poems of chiefs invite entrepreneurship, as the old formulas and themes have to be made to interact with new and often complicated political situations. But the formulas and themes are reshuffled rather than supplanted with new materials. (Ong 1982, 41)

The introduction of new elements into old stories calls for skills in improvisation and for a high level of spontaneity in adapting the given form to the current situation. Since the storyteller aims to meet the taste of current audiences and often integrates the events, gossip and jokes of the day into his tales to update them, it is crucial that he know his audience and their situation to appeal to them. Audience involvement and response in oral cultures directly interacts with the storytelling, forming a dialogue between the audience and the storyteller, and the role of the audience is a remarkably active one, as we shall see in a later chapter. The relationship to the audience is an intense one, central to the success of the story.

The connection between the storyteller and the audience manifests itself in various ways. The storyteller often connects his story with the world that the audience lives in through cross-referencing, and through intertextuality, irony, and discourse commentary.

The tradition of combining the traditional with the contemporary is also found in *lakhon chattri*, a form of classical Thai drama:

*Lakhon chattri* performers, particularly jokers, not only perform with themes and images that have long-standing tradition in Thai society, such as Thai kingship, but they also incorporate new and emerging desires, attributes and images that are popular with their contemporary audiences. These might include an imitation Rolex taking on powers formerly attributed to a magic crystal, or an epic warrior wooing his beloved with a ballad from the latest pop charts in Thailand. (...) By incorporating new images into a scenario, comic performers keep pace with contemporary times thereby revitalizing an ancient theatrical tradition; but they also reveal to audience members the saliency of the didactic lessons inherent in the dance-drama. (...)

This performance technique not only presents the audience with different ways of telling a story, but it engenders multiple structures of meaning as participants apprehend and interpret the unfolding activity and relate it to the broader cultural and social contexts. Additionally, the multivocality of a symbol encourages different meanings to emerge. (Grow 1996, 51)

In Thai drama, the introduction of contemporary elements into traditional story structures creates multiple levels of meaning, refreshing and updating familiar old tales. This method is also apparent early on in Thai film history, especially in the practice of live dubbing. This practice, known as *pak*, was used extensively in Thai film history from the silent era on, at first to translate intertitles and later to provide narration, using the form of



narration found in Thai *khon* (masked drama). It proved a simple and effective way of solving language problems with foreign films. After World War II, 35mm film was in short supply and expensive, so it became the standard practice to shoot on 16mm stock without sound and to dub the films live during the screening or, beginning in the 1970s, in the studio during postproduction (Chalida 2001, 130). During live dubbing, the dubbers usually did not strictly follow one specific script version of the dialogue, but adapted the lines of the characters to the screening situation. For example, they spoke in the local accent of the region in which the screening took place, or added allusions to local people, the news and rumours of the day, or jokes about the region or the country. At times, dubbers even made ironic comments on the actors' costumes or the plot development. Another common twist added in dubbing was to change the names of the towns and sights shown in the film to those of local places (Fouquet 1988, 44). By integrating the local, regional or national context, the dubber adapted the film to the world its spectators lived in. Generally, the audience greatly appreciated the additional level of entertainment this practice brought them.

While live dubbing is hardly practised anymore, cross-references still appear frequently in contemporary Thai film. Movies will often cite other movies, allude to the Thai film scene, local happenings and pop culture. At the end of *Ruang Talok 69 (Sixty9ine)*, Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 1999), the heroine Tum sinks her pick-up truck into a murky swamp. She does this to get rid of several corpses in the truck, the result of her involuntary involvement with petty criminals who delivered a box of money to her door by mistake. The plot of the film clearly alludes to *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1960) and its protagonist Marion Crane, who steals money and flees by car, only to be murdered shortly thereafter. At the end of the film, her corpse is found in a pick-up truck retrieved from a swamp. Pen-ek's heroine Tum, however, resists the temptation to take the money and run, instead deciding to leave behind her the feeling of greed and the slew of brutal murders that follow the misunderstanding. Instead, she starts fresh. While the truck in the swamp echoes an element of *Psycho*, the swamp also alludes to the Thai expression *nam nao* (stagnant, murky water), used as a snide description for the shallow and unappealing

qualities of cheap, formulaic Thai film productions that were just being overcome by newer, fresher films at the time *Ruang Talok 69* was made.

Allusions to pop culture are frequent as well. In the childhood drama *Fan Chan (My Girl)*, Vitcha Gojiew, Songyos Sugmakanan, Nithiwat Tharathorn, Witthaya Thongyooyong, Anusorn Trisirikasem and Komgrit Triwimol, (2003), the fathers of both protagonists run neighbouring barbershops. While one man is very exact, neat and business-minded, the other is long-haired and artistically inclined, a contrast that provides several comic moments. An additional laugh comes from the fact that the long-haired barber is portrayed by Preecha Chanapai, also known as Lek Carabao, a member of a long-haired rock band known throughout Thailand for their rebellious and critical attitude towards the state bureaucracy. The rock star later reprised his role of a barber in *Phuean Sanit (Dear Dakanda)*, a 2005 film directed by one of the six *Fan Chan* directors, Komgrit Triwimol. The female protagonist of *Tawipop (The Siam Renaissance)*, Surapong Pinijkhar, (2004) was the first part in a Thai film played by Florence Vanida Faivre, a young actress who studied the Thai language for this production and whose half-Thai, half-French origin was discussed by the media prior to the film's release. Her film character time-travels back and forth between present-day Bangkok and the Thai capital of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Upon her first conversation with palace officials of the past, they comment on her strange, foreign accent – a dialogue line that, in the context of the plot, refers to her modern Bangkok accent, but in the context of pop culture alludes to her half-foreign roots.

Cross-references are, above all, an enjoyable game with the audience. Irony and humour figure strongly; as small moments of comic relief, they lighten the plot, interrupting its seriousness and its narrative linearity. The laugh provides for an instant's distance from the movie's storyline. This distance sets the stage for metacommentary as an additional level of entertainment: the films often comment on themselves as discourse. They seem to enjoy mentioning their being part of Thai cinema. «Do you prefer Thai or foreign movies?» a projectionist asks a woman he is flirting with in *Monrak Transistor* (Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 2001). «Thai movies!» she answers, «the actors are much cuter!» Similarly, the characters in the ghost movie *Buppha Ratre (Flower of the Night)*, Yuthlert Sippapak, (2003) start chatting about their favourite Thai films.

Given the self-referentiality of these discourse commentaries, part of the fun lies in the fact that they refer to well-known, familiar, popular knowledge and are inside jokes. Understanding them allows the spectator to feel part of a community, whether local or national. The films reflect events that belong to the everyday surroundings of the audience and convey a sense of home. Many of the references are, of course, not comprehensible to foreign audiences.

Several Western authors have interpreted the web of cross-references that characterizes Thai cinema as an affinity to postmodernism (Williamson 2004, 85). While this certainly applies, these elements are at the same time rooted in long-held cultural practices of the region, many of which have their origin in oral culture. Thus, they can be understood as postmodern workings, but at the same time as signs of an unproblematic continuity with the past that, as Rachel Harrison puts it, shows a «reiteration and respectful reinvention of tradition» (Harrison 2007, 206). Harrison states further that it is misleading to simply apply concepts like intertextuality or postmodernity to Thai culture, since the history, conditions and contexts of cultural production might differ greatly from that of the Western countries in which the concept of postmodernism originated:

While the tendency of cultural theory in the West has been to universalize claims regarding the postmodern condition, meaning is in effect much less stable than this project would suggest. It slips, alters and is deferred across geo-cultural borders, despite current Western fantasies that globalization erases the significance of such boundaries altogether. (Harrison 2007, 206)

### **From Orality to Literacy: Cinema as Indicator of Change**

As an effect of oral residue, communities are enmeshed in a shared net of meaning, with the communal world as reference point. In this conception, text is not a free-floating object, but bound to institutions and social situations, thus placed in a social, political and religious framework. The ancient status of a text is that of a nonmaterial, common property, for which authorship is accorded a lesser status than in cultures of literacy. Texts generate multiple structures of meaning, depending on the groups involved in the reception process and the contexts of their existence.

With the emergence of the modernist capitalist system, reception becomes increasingly individualized. Meaning is now generated to a much greater extent by individuals isolated from one other during reception. Market relations define a text as object of entertainment, to be bought and consumed. The materialization of texts and the role of mass media – books, movies, DVDs, and so forth – gain importance and bring on significant changes as culture shifts from orality towards literacy.

In the world of contemporary Thai film, elements of both cultural systems coexist: remnants from orality are visible in the handling of retelling, remaking, authorship, and film history. At the same time, the shift from oral culture to that of an individualized modernist society, concerned with the individual and its consumer power, as well as with individualized political consciousness, is taking place. Elements from oral residue endure in the structures of modern-day entertainment, especially in the conservative working system of Thai film production majors. These elements include mainstream genres and formulaicism, which go hand in hand with the repressive censorship rules inhibiting significant creative change and intellectual radicalism. While the mainstream generally shows strong tendencies towards oral residue, independent film operates more among the lines of modernist society and cultures of literacy, displaying a stronger taste for newly conceived scripts, subjectivist forms of narration, and enhanced individuality. The differing attitudes towards retelling mirror clashes in ideology and self-perception, indicative of a society evolving from ancient structures toward modernity.

### 3.2 Genre, Story Structure and Formulaism

In his review of *Fah Talai Jone (Tears of the Black Tiger)*, Wisit Sasanatieng, 2000), US film journalist Chuck Stephens writes:

... *Tears of the Black Tiger* was born of Wisit's desire to locate the historical essence of a truly Thai cinema. The look and feel of his film isn't based just on movies, mind you, but on Thai film's theatrical roots (from the musical and gestural mannerisms of *Likay* performance, mainly) and its florid advertising artefacts (...). There's also ample evidence of Seventies Thai cinema's fateful alien encounter with the spaghetti cinema of Sergio Leone. The result is a hybrid of hybrids. At once a perfectly traditional (and hilariously clichéd) Thai romance about lovers corralled by class difference, as well as a *pad thai* Western where cowboys covet machine guns and swear blood oaths to one another under the shadow of an impassive Buddha (...). (Stephens 2001/1)

The review – just as, of course, the movie – touches on several aspects of genre in Thai cinema, past and present. It sees *likay* theater as the indigenous predecessor of Thai cinema; it dwells on the influence of foreign genres such as the Western, seeing the result of this influence as hybridity; it mentions the existence of traditional Thai genres, such as the romance threatened by class difference; and finally it dubs the term *pad thai* Western, alluding to the genre of spaghetti western and replacing the spaghetti with a well-known Thai dish of noodles, fried with shrimp, tofu and soybean sprouts and seasoned with lime juice and fish sauce.

This subchapter aims to examine several of these issues: the multiple roots of Thai genres, the influence of indigenous drama forms as well as that of foreign genres, and recent developments in Thai genre cinema.

#### Thai Genres and Their Multiple Origins

As Stephens' review suggests, Thai cinema consists of a wide range of genres, encompassing indigenous forms that are related to earlier forms of performing arts, as well as forms that are more or less strongly influenced by foreign genres. Contrary to what one might expect, the reception and adaptation of foreign genres is by no means a recent phenomenon linked to the globalization of film culture and the film industry, but appears in Thai cinema from an early age on. Over time, European, US, Chinese and

Indian cinematic traditions have all left their marks on Thai cinema, a matter to which we will return later.

As Stephens points out, the Thai-ified cowboys from *Fah Talai Jone* hearken back to Thai gangster movies of the 1950s and 1960s that portrayed the gangsters and antiheroes drawn from the cowboys of classical US westerns, complete with checkered shirts, bandannas and harmonicas. These cowboy/gangster movies were set in the Thai countryside and involved plotlines about heroic fights between good and evil, paralleling them with romance. The film's styling drew on the huge popularity of US westerns that were shown in Thailand from the 1940s on, and with which Thai audiences soon became highly familiar. Interestingly, the artistic distinctiveness of *Fah Talai Jone* lies not so much in the appearance of Western influences as in their Thai-ification. The film revels in the exoticism of Southeast Asians wearing cowboy attire and in the garish color scheme so different from the sand, earth and sky tones characteristic of the US western genre.



Stylized Western iconography in *Fah Talai Jone*

By honouring and at the same time exoticizing Thai adaptations of foreign culture, *Fah Talai Jone* is in line with a tendency found in much of recent Thai film: the references to Thai film history and to its traditional genres that have become strongly apparent since

the late 1990s. References often take the form of hommages to Thai movie culture, such as the big old movie poster murals adorning houses in *Mah Nakorn* (*Citizen Dog*, Wisit Sasanatieng, 2004), or the form of pastiche, such as *Hua jai toranong* (*The Adventures of Iron Pussy*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Michael Shaowanasai, 2003), a camp take on the spy thriller/melodrama action genre. In tune with the general emphasis on Thainess, Thai genre cinema, disregarded as unaccomplished, shallow and without value in previous eras, seems to be enjoying something of a change in status; it is now regarded nostalgically as an endearing and authentic expression of indigenous culture. As is clear from the quotation above, however, Thai genres are hardly purely indigenous, but have evolved through the interplay of both Thai and foreign influences. The cowboys in 1950s Thai bandit movies might resemble their western counterparts in attire, but their demeanor, values, and thinking probably differ greatly. Even though their actions might at times resemble those of US movie cowboys, they hardly mean the same things. Signifiers, when transferred from another culture, might keep their appearance, but change their meaning in ways that are hard to perceive from an outside perspective. The way a Hollywood western movie is perceived in Thailand is hardly the same as in the USA, and a Thai adaptation of a western naturally results in something other than a US western. The very term «western» takes on a different meaning in its transfer to a foreign viewing context and audience. In order to adequately study Thai genres, the notions of specific genres as understood by a Western audience need to be reexamined.

### **Genres and Cultural Coding**

Genre is often used as a marketing tool for so-called world cinema: Films from certain countries or regions are marketed through specific genres because this makes them graspable and classifiable for foreign audiences (Ciecko 2006, 25). Ghost, horror, and martial arts movies, for instance, make up the main part of East and Southeast Asian movies shown in the West. In fact, the term world cinema seems to be handled as a genre in itself, used as a label in video stores and cinema programmes alongside labels like action, comedy, or documentary – which, it seems, automatically mean European, US or Western action, comedy, or documentary. The fact that films are from countries with a

minor film industry, or from developing countries, seems to be reason enough to group them in a category of their own. Or perhaps their way of showing action, comedy or documentary is deemed too different from Western forms to be grouped together, hence their separate placement. Is, say, Southeast Asian action less representative of what is understood as the action genre than Hollywood action? The essence of a specific genre is largely defined by US mainstream standards, providing a pattern into which global cinema is fitted in order to meet cultural and market expectations.

Genre might be described as a grouping of narratives, a systemization of the general design of movie plots, shaped by certain recurring basic units. These are shaped by conventions and cultural codes. As Seymour Chatman writes:

(...) the characterization of plot into macrostructures and typologies depends upon an understanding of cultural codes and their interplay with literary and artistic codes and codes of ordinary life. It relies heavily on verisimilitude. (...) Plot-typologists must recognize the conventional nature of their basic units. The units only materialize when an audience enters into a contract with the author on the basis of known or learnable conventions. (Chatman 1978, 95)

This means it is necessary to know as much as possible about a culture in order to be able to group its narratives in a way that makes sense for that culture, and in order to avoid cultural misunderstandings. Applying Western genres to non-Western films is thus insufficient without further specification as to how these genres fit into the cinematic history of the non-Western country. For example, Thai western-gangster films of the 1950s seem to incorporate directly adapted cowboys and western shoot-outs; but under this surface, they draw strongly from the tradition of the *nak leng* (gangster) motif that was, and is, very popular in the Thai action genre. The cowboy becomes a kind of adapted foreign expression for a Thai archetype, a combination of signifiers that results in the ultimate transnational bad guy character.

Another example: Thai melodrama, like classical Hollywood melodrama, is marked by the excessive display of emotion, yet unlike Hollywood melodrama, the moral background that shapes and triggers these emotions, and by which they are interpreted, is strongly influenced by Buddhist belief. Thus, certain emotions are interpreted differently than they would be in a Western context, and emotions per se occupy a different position



in the moral system. They are valued differently and their consequences are different than they would be in non-Buddhist cultures. If a Hollywood melodrama typically depicts jealousy as a negative emotion ideally overcome by positive attitudes like trust and love, a Thai melodrama understands jealousy as a fleeting, unstable, and therefore illusory experience, just as any emotion is by its nature. Since the moral concepts that form the background of emotions vary, the motivation of telling a melodramatic story probably does as well.

While it is not possible here to examine thoroughly the transnational shifts in individual genre transfers, the initial remarks above show that specific genres cannot be universally applied as a tool to examine films, but always require contextualisation.

### **Story Structure: The Concept of Flavors**

Not only do the existing genres often differ, but the concept of genre itself may be different from a Western understanding. Classical Thai genres of the 1950-1970 era, the golden age of the Thai film industry, are marked by a combination of overlapping elements that, in Western cinema, would each belong to individual genres. Comedy, romance, melodrama, and so forth are often combined in a single film: Action films usually include sequences with a basic atmosphere of comedy and romance; ghost movies generally contain elements of comedy, eroticism, and tragedy. The basic atmosphere of a film is clear from the start on, according to its genre, but traditionally it will always contain sequences with contrasting moods to complement the basic mood. While Hollywood genres often display a typical combination of atmospheres – a thriller often has romantic or erotic elements, romance is often combined with comedy, and suspense with horror – the range of moods forming a classic Thai genre film is wider and more contrasting. Traces of this wide variation of moods are still apparent in the contemporary Thai mainstream, popular cinema made by the studio system and catering to a mass audience. This vein of cinema is the descendant of classic Thai genre cinema from the 1950s onwards.

G rard Fouquet likens the concept of various atmospheric moments to savors: the combination of savors creates the typical composition of a genre, and it is the interplay of

savors that make the film as a whole enjoyable and entertaining. Each genre has its own specific typical combination of a dominant savor and several secondary ones linked to it. The main savor of a romance film is, obviously, that of love. According to Fouquet, this is usually combined with savors of the familial (the evocation of familial love and belonging), the enraged (caused by the evocation of anger), and the sweet (the enchanting rendering of feelings). Moreover, romance can be divided into subgenres: tragic or sweet romance, depending on whether the pathetic or the sweet predominates (Fouquet 1988 and 1989/1990). Savors are expressed by dramatic elements, such as typical characters, dialogue, situations, settings, or combinations of these, that prompt emotion in the spectator. These are aesthetic emotions, existing for the purpose of viewing pleasure.<sup>30</sup> Instead of having plots constructed by arcs that culminate toward the end of the film, as is the case in most Western genres, classic Thai genre cinema is structured by the succession of intense moments that are coded and standardized to evoke a certain atmosphere and convey a certain mood. Several such moments occur over the course of a film, usually evoking different moods.

*Buppah Ratree* (*Flower of the Night*, Yuthlert Sippapak, 2003) is a recent ghost movie modelled on the classic Thai ghost genre. It starts as a teenage romance, then changes into a tragic drama: Buppah is a young girl who gets pregnant by Ake, a fellow student who deserts her after he learns this news. He convinces her to have an abortion and accompanies her, only to leave her alone in her apartment afterwards. That night, Buppah bleeds to death due to complications from the abortion. After her corpse is found by the police, the film shifts into the ghost genre: Buppah's vengeful spirit starts to haunt the apartment house, creating grueling scenes involving blood and vomit and causing many tenants to leave. At times, the explicit display of blood, violence and dismembered body parts lets the film stray into the horror/slasher genre. In between, comic relief is provided by sequences with a false shaman who tries to exorcise the ghost, but is obviously a preposterous fake, and by scenes involving the other tenants of the apartment house,

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<sup>30</sup> Fouquet 1989/90, 4ff. He derives the concept of savors from the concept of *rasa* in Indian classical literature, which classified all the various moods of literature. The Thai word for savor, *ros*, is related to the Sanskrit word *rasa*.

comic characters who joke and act awkwardly while trying to confront the ghost, which results in many slapstick gags.

The typicality of several differing moods or savors coexisting in a single film is clearly apparent in the design of classic movie posters. The poster artists who drew them sought to reflect the varied savors through their illustration of different moments of the movie. The poster of *Monrak lookthung* (Rungsri Tussanapuk, 1970), for example, features the title in stylized yellow letters above a large depiction of the films' leading couple, played by Mitr and Petchara, the best-known actors in Thai film history. This establishes the main tone of the movie as that of romance. The couple embraces in a rural setting, seated on the ground beneath a vast sky. To their right in the background, a band of musicians is playing; at left, they are shown in smaller frame, riding a water buffalo along a riverbank. These elements convey the roles played by *lookthung*, country music, and the rural setting play for the romance, adding the attraction of song, dance and beautiful landscapes. A scantily clad female character at the edge of the poster stands for a rival to the female lead, announcing excitement and intrigue. In the lower right corner, a small insert shows two male characters in an apparently silly situation, indicating the presence of comic moments. Finally, inserts in the upper half of the poster display side characters and present the other actors of the cast, adding further star value. The segmentation of the poster gives a good idea of the various kinds of entertaining moments the audience can expect from the movie, which is made attractive through the combination of flavors it promises.

While a Thai genre film always has a main mood, and thus belongs to a main genre type with an according plotline, its structure is additive. There is a main arc of events that follows the classical structure of exposition, plot development, resolution and coda; at the same time, minor events are serially strewn in. They are often only loosely connected to the main plot and function as sidelines that add further flavors for enjoyment.

This structure can be seen in *Ponglang sading lumsing saina* (*Ponglang Amazing Theatre*, Rerkchai Pongphet, 2007), a successful mainstream comedy about an aging, provincial cinema that is haunted by ghosts and losing its audience. The film's main

plotline follows the owner's attempts to sell the cinema via a real estate agent, with whom he is secretly in love. This provides the first side strain of events, characterized by traits of romantic comedy. Other side events are the recurring appearances of ghosts in the movie audience during screenings – adding frightening, supernatural elements – the relationship between a ticket vendor and a mysterious, good-looking taxi driver, adding a touch of drama, and the various recurring gags and slapstick performances by some of the cinema staff, who are played by well-known and popular stand-up comedians. All these side plot sequences do not join to the previous sequences by any necessity of the plot development; rather, they are used to vary the atmosphere and add balance, creating a rhythm of changing moods. An intense ghost scene will be followed by a scene contributing to the main plot, the sale of the cinema, which will then be succeeded by a comedy sequence to lighten things up.

After the cinema closes, the staff do not continue on to other jobs, but keep returning to the cinema to eat and sing songs together late into the night. The owner then decides to turn the cinema into a music studio. This introduces the musical strain into the film and gives it the opportunity to cast a successful Northern Thai folklore band, adding song and dance scenes as yet another flavor. *Ponglang Sading* closes with a choreographed musical performance involving the entire cast, using the cinema hall as a stage and the screen as a backdrop.

The structure of classic genre cinema is reminiscent of that of the classical Thai dance drama *lakorn*.

Its dramatic form is not closed, but consists of loosely joined sequences. These episodes can be disassembled and shown individually, as they often are, since whole plays tend to be very lengthy. These individual performance units need not add directly to the plot development, as their meaning lies in contributing to the overall entertainment value of the piece as a whole. A Thai music drama is not structured as a finished work of art, but as a flexible, alterable text. Deviations and variations are part of each performance and a source of audience enjoyment. Variations and improvisations are not understood as random, but as a creative process, and as a part of the fun (Chetana 2004, 229).

### **Viewing Practices, Orality and Additivity**

The flexible, open structure of genre films is closely linked to the viewing practice of Thai drama, in which attention is not focused undividedly on a stage play from beginning to end, but shared between the stage and conversation with fellow viewers and acquaintances. Attending a play is traditionally understood as a social happening, and communicative exchange is important at all times, including during the play.

Similar principles apply to film viewing, since screening and viewing practices in theater and cinema are related, and were particularly related in earlier stages of film history.

The most recent form of film viewing is shaped through the arrival of the large and luxurious multiplexes that have sprung up in larger cities, mainly Bangkok, since the mid-1980s.<sup>31</sup> This is probably the viewing location Western audiences are most familiar with. Movie theaters in provincial towns and Bangkok outskirts are usually smaller, with only one screen. They share film prints with other cinemas. At one time, only a few prints were made of each film, and reels would be transported back and forth between cinemas during projection, usually by motorbike couriers. Because of traffic jams and the like, the couriers were sometimes late, projection was interrupted, and the audience had to wait until the next reel arrived. Moreover, the prints were usually in bad shape due and tore easily, which meant even more interruptions of the projection.

Another form of cinema besides theater exhibition is the itinerant cinema. This mobile form of cinema was widely popular in the 1950s and 1960s; since the 1970s, it has been in slow decline. It consists of one or several persons touring the countryside with a truck carrying one or two 35mm or 16mm projectors and a portable screen, most commonly set up in the open or, if a large hall is accessible nearby, inside a building. The audience sits on the ground in front of the screen.

There are different types of itinerant cinema. *Nang re* are set up by private companies as an entertainment tour for rural areas where there are no movie theaters nearby. Before the screening, the truck drives around the region, announcing the coming attraction with

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<sup>31</sup> For more details on the following typology of film screening, see Fouquet 1988, pp. 36-44, on which the descriptions are based.

loudspeakers. The cinema usually stays in each village for one night only; if it stays for several nights, it will show a different film each day. The spectators pay an entrance fee. *Nang khai ya* (movies to sell medicine) work in a similar way. The difference lies in the fact that these screenings are free of charge, because they are shown by traveling medicine salesmen to attract customers. At least once during the screening, there would be a break in which the projectionist would sell medicine. The screening was only continued when the salesman considered the amount of medicine sold and the money he made satisfactory – or else, when the audience got too impatient and demanded that the film be continued. A similar type of free cinema is *nang khoh khao*. Here, the projectionist walks through the village the morning after the screening, asking for rice. A different form of itinerant cinema is *nang klang pleng* or *nang borisat*. These itinerant cinemas take place at temple fairs, village fairs, and celebrations such as ordinations of monks, cremations, and similar occasions. They are often set up alongside other traditional forms of entertainment such as *likay*, *lam that*, a largely improvised singing performance, and animal shows.

Differences to Western viewing conditions are found not only in the locations and the characteristics of the projection, but also in the nature of the audience and their behaviour. As Juree Vichit-Vadakhan describes, for a Thai audience, going to the cinema is usually a typical family or group outing, and rarely done alone. An important aspect of watching a movie is sharing the experience with friends and relatives. Only with the act of sharing does the viewing experience become complete and fully satisfying (Juree 1977, 164). Children, babies and toddlers are frequently taken along by their relatives. As is the custom in Thai culture, food plays a prominent role. There are food stalls outside every cinema, in the entrance, and sometimes hawkers in the hall:

Before and during the film show, a quantity of food is consumed as evidenced by the symphony of chewing, nut cracking, and popping of melon seeds. One's nostrils must quickly get used to food odors from barbecues, dried squids, pickled fruits etc. The aftermath of a grand eating spree is obvious because at the conclusion of a film, one must take hop-scootch-steps to avoid stepping into piles of discarded paper or plastic bags, little bamboo sticks, melon seeds, nutshells, etc. (Juree 1977, 164)

Besides eating and drinking, another typical audience activity during viewing is commenting and discussing the film. Viewing is not a passive act, and viewers do not seem bothered by children's inquiries or crying or other peoples' comments. As with comments, emotional reactions such as laughing, screaming or crying are not suppressed, but given free rein; exchanges of opinion are common and enjoyed by the audience. The presence of others is generally appreciated.

During open air shows, the sounds of the environment mix with the film soundtrack: noises of the village and of nature surrounding the village. Before the screening, loudspeakers blare out advertising. Noise is not perceived as a disturbance.

Another striking characteristic is the frequent motion in the cinema hall. The audience takes breaks from the film, leaves and reenters the auditorium to smoke, walk around, buy food and drinks, or simply to escape for a while if the film does not sufficiently capture their attention. Children get bored by sitting still and wander off, to be retrieved sooner or later by concerned relatives.

Thai audiences are neither silent nor invisible – in contrast to Western audiences, where sounds made by viewers are often perceived as a disturbance and the noise and smell of popcorn-eating is often met with contempt or sometimes even reproaches.

These characteristics are less prominent nowadays in Thai urban contexts, where audiences have largely adapted a more Western, subdued mode of viewing and moviegoing has become a popular dating activity, such that, in addition to groups of friends or relatives, there are couples in the audience as well. In rural areas, however, the aforementioned behavior can still be observed, especially at open-air screenings and in particular at screenings in festive contexts, such as temple fairs. Watching TV in the home elicits the same behavior, being a less formal viewing context than the urban cineplexes.

The background for some of these phenomena can be found in the specific nature of historical itinerant Thai film screenings. At temple fairs, movies were shown alongside

performances of dance and theatre. As several of these shows took place simultaneously, it was common for members of the audience to wander around between the stages and screens. They would watch part of a movie, leave the theatre, perhaps buy food or drink or meet friends, stop at a dance show for a while and return to the film later. Spectators often did not watch a film from beginning to end, but tended to view several different shows in bits and pieces. The film itself was part of a larger spectacle consisting of many shows, meeting acquaintances, taking the family out, eating, chatting and other enjoyable activities. The classical «savor» story structure of serial episodes conforms to this viewing practice: films aim to capture attention in every given episode. There is a strong focus on the present moment of the storyline; it must not only be attractive, but above all immediately recognizable in its basic mood and meaning, so that it may easily be situated in the context of the whole film.<sup>32</sup> This allows the audience the freedom to take some time off from viewing without getting lost in the course of narration. Structured in this way, a film can easily be viewed in fragments that are each entertaining in their own right, since the fragments quickly recapture the attention of the audience even if it has missed a part of the film (Juree 2003, 160 and 168, and Fouquet 1988, 48).

The habit of not viewing movies in total silence and physical inertness, of feeling free to leave the theatre for a break and move around, eat or speak during the screening possibly also has its origins in the duration of traditional Thai drama. *Khon* and *lakhon* performances traditionally extended for as long as three days and nights, a time span no one could attend without breaks at some time or other (Mattani 1996, 201). Thai audiences' low concern with continuity probably developed over time in accordance with the nature of the performances they attended. Another equally pragmatic reason may lie in the fact that screenings were frequently interrupted anyway because of reels arriving late or worn out celluloid strips tearing, as mentioned above. Therefore, the chances of seeing a whole movie without breaks were not something an audience was necessarily used to in the first place.

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<sup>32</sup> Chetana Nagavajara, in a conversation with the author, February 2007.



The nature of Thai film viewing probably contrasts with that of a Western audience accustomed to focusing absolute attention on the stage or the screen and remaining silent and still until the end of the show, in order not to disrupt concentration. These varying preferences go hand in hand with differing conceptions of ideal story narration. From this perspective, the quality of storytelling lies less in the closed, intricate framework of its plot structure or in subtle details which can only be caught by unwavering concentration. Careful composition, symmetry and exact timing of incidents that can only be enjoyed by paying close attention to a film is less of a concern to Thai films than their ability to catch the viewers' attention at any given moment and to prompt their – preferably strong – reaction at once (Fouquet 1988, 48). The audience is regarded as an important entity and is therefore allowed the utmost freedom by the artists and entertainers (Fouquet 1988, 47). The entertainment must remain casual, and never impose on the viewers' wishes or habits. The importance of the audience feeling free to act according to its impulses is deeply rooted in the importance of conviviality.

While the synchronicity of multiple activities apparent in traditional viewing practices is linked with Thai genre structure, another important influence is that of orality and its additive treatment of thought and expression. Instead of the linear plots typical of written discourse, oral discourse tends toward episodic structures, which flow into the additive, multi-strain structure of Thai genre film.

### **Genre and Formulaicism**

Formulaicism, another distinct characteristic of orality, is strongly present in Thai mainstream cinema. Genre outlines were strictly followed throughout the era of postwar filmmaking. Almost never were they deconstructed, mixed or broken up; instead, their matrix was reused countless times. While the genres have evolved over time, what has remained unchanged up to the present day is their domination of the Thai mainstream and the fact that films rarely stray from the genre system, following its underlying formulas. The classic genre formulas of the 1950s and 1960s remain influential today. Thai film can be described throughout its history as a cinema of genres, with a limited independent scene emerging only recently.

The first sound films made in Thailand in the 1930s and 1940s followed the formulas of traditional *lakhon*, dance drama, by being romantic and melodramatic, placing a heavy emphasis on songs and music, and concentrating on the characters of the *phra ek* and *nang ek*, the hero and heroine who form the leading romantic couple (Mattani 1996, 187). These character formulas proved highly successful, since they were recognizable from traditional drama, which had been a leading form of popular entertainment before the advent of cinema. Another reason for the popularity of the romance genre and the hero/heroine formulas was that the leading roles were cast with movie stars. The Thai film industry, led by the Sri Krung Film Studio, began to develop its powerful star system in this era.

While Thai film has roots in *lakhon*, foreign films were influential as well. During the era of silent film, many of the films shown in Thailand were of European origin; but after the decline of the European film industry during World War I, Thai distributors imported mainly American films, which became very popular. Imported silent films generally had English intertitles. Since few Thais knew English at that time, the audiences were more attracted to action films and musicals, and westerns were more popular than dramas (Chalida 2001, 123). Also, as in theater, many comedies with happy and moral endings were adapted and translated, a choice that happened organically through the consideration of Thai preferences (Mattani 1996, 158).

The influence of US westerns, comedy, musicals and melodrama is obvious in the genres of 1950s-1960s Thai cinema. It reached a pinnacle of formulaicism in this era, with repetitious storylines and a genre system made up mainly of the action-gangster film, the love melodrama/musical, comedy, and romantic adventures. These genres were often local adaptations of foreign genres: the encounter with Hollywood led to the Thai version of the western and the spy thriller, the popularity of East Asian cinema influenced the kung fu action movie, and the reception of Indian films and Hollywood musicals resulted in more musical numbers in Thai film. Because most people who worked in the film business originally came from the theater and simply changed industry for financial reasons, the mise-en-scene was highly theatrical, mainly using static long shots.

Filmmakers rarely adapted US norms of mise-en-scène, preferring something more in the manner of filmed theater.<sup>33</sup>

While clearly belonging to an individual genre, the films were structured in a lengthy, episodic way and involved a variety of subplots with various flavors, as mentioned above (Sirichai 1988, 138). The unchanging, repetitive plots gained their appeal from the popularity of movie stars, and the star system became a huge selling point, reaching its peak with the fame of the actor couple Mitr and Petchara. The shooting of a new movie became a favourite subject for magazines, which often covered the shoots directly from the film set, keeping the readers updated on a daily basis; this media-fuelled hype accompanying the production of new movies greatly contributed to the film star cult (Fouquet 1988, 31).

The concentration on genre and stars as marketing points is visible in movie posters of this era, which usually follow a similar buildup to that of *Monrak lookthung*. As Boonrak Boonyaketmala writes,

(...) from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, more than half of the films made in Thailand featured two superstars, the strong Mitr Chaibancha and the sweet Petchara Chaowarat, whose physical and psychological orientations reflected the ideal man and woman in a predominantly agricultural society. (...) The dominant cultural theme of the several hundred films in which they co-starred pitted modernity against traditional values. Mitr was almost always cast in the role of a handsome, rich and courageous urbanite who suddenly falls madly in love with the invariably pretty, poor and passive yet passionate Petchara, who was often a daughter of a peasant family that cared much about traditional virtues. (Boonrak 1992, 82)

Apart from a short wave of social realism that appeared in Thai cinema during the mid-1970s and soon ebbed away, the genre system continued to be formative. Annette Hamilton describes the range of 1980s genres as follows:

Video stores and film magazines tend to classify films as: drama (nang chiwit), comedy (nang talok), action (nang bu), historical (nang prawatisat), and musicals (nang pleeng). A further means of classification is often applied to subtypes of the «drama» by theme: for example, «struggle between good and evil», «conflict about unequal social status», «conflict over marital relations». (Hamilton 1992, 264)

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<sup>33</sup> Fouquet 1988, 84, and Dome Sukwong, in a conversation with the author, February 2004.

Another genre that remained popular throughout Thai film history is the ghost movie. The mid-1980s saw a paradigm shift in audiences: teenagers became the main moviegoing demographic. Targeting moviegoers under 17 years of age became big business. Teen comedies, romances and classroom drama made their way onto the screen, adding another standard genre.

Most of Thai mainstream production is a continuation of pre-1970s genre cinema.<sup>34</sup> Though genres evolve over the decades, their status as formulaic mass entertainment persists. Ghost stories, slapstick, drama and action, the traditional popular genres, still form the largest segment of contemporary production. All indigenous productions that ranked as weekly bestsellers at the Thai box office in 2008 can clearly be categorized as comedies, ghost, action, or romance films.<sup>35</sup>

The upswing that took place after the mid-1990s has not changed genre stereotypes; rather, the industry has extended generic elements into more expensive productions. While genre films now often display better special effects, more elaborate stunts, and higher technological standards, their storylines and their episodic structure still follow the familiar patterns. Moreover, they are visible in Thai television series, *lakhon teevee*, which also follow classical principles and aesthetics.

### **Genres, the Industry and Censorship**

While the rigidity of the genre system is rooted in traditional drama forms and the influence of oral culture, it is also strongly shaped by a film industry that regards genre formulas as the key to commercial success. As Pimpaka Towira, an independent filmmaker and producer, notes, Thai mass audiences appreciate knowing what to expect, and films with surprising twists, unusual plotlines and open endings are not well received. For this reason, scripts with plotlines that fall outside the categories of the preexisting genres have a hard time finding a producer inside the commercial film or

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<sup>34</sup> For historical perspectives on Thai genres, see Boonrak 1992, Lent 1990, Amalanatham 1983, Barmé 1999, and Anchalee and Sorraditthep 2005.

<sup>35</sup> See <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/thailand/?yr=2008&currency=us&p=.htm> (retrieved May 31, 2009)

television industry.<sup>36</sup> The avoidance of financial risks hinders creativity, but producers usually prefer being repetitive to the risk of being unconventional and thus commercially unsuccessful (Fouquet 1988, 66).

As Steve Neale writes, «genres are not seen as forms of textual codifications, but as systems of orientations, expectation and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject» (Neale 1980, 19). They exist within a context of economic relations and practices. The systematization of movie production into genres is linked to commercialism and the working of the movie industry that caters to the need for generic entertainment. By labeling productions according to a genre system, the industry wishes to access specific audiences with their characteristic expectations and preferences. In economic terms, genre can be seen as «a means of controlling demand» (Neale 1980, 55): though genres evolve over time, their relative stability enables producers to predict their market value. A variety of genres appeals to a variety of audiences, namely to different market sectors of mass media, and thus entertainment production can be standardized. Profitable genres are deemed successful, so their pattern is repeated, perhaps with variations. This repetition leads to the formation of key genres that are more powerful than others in their ability to generate profits, to anchor themselves in the entertainment market, and to inhabit an important place in the general awareness of the public. However, genre hierarchies also shift over time in relation to various factors of audience taste, as well as economic and social contexts. Individual genres gain and lose audiences, box office return and status.

An important reason for the durability of the Thai genre system lies in the producers' effort to avoid flops; another can be found in the political context of the Thai entertainment industry. Boonrak Boonyaketmala, a highly regarded scholar who works in the field of local media, stresses that most Thai films during the 1960s and early 1970s were escapist entertainment that showed little concern with contemporary problems, national or international, and that they were received by film critics and intellectuals as

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<sup>36</sup> In a conversation with the author, March 2004.

static, low-quality, and repetitious. They were often called *nam nao* (stagnant water). On the possible reasons for this formulaicism, he writes:

While many explanations for the unkind, but nevertheless true, judgments above may be advanced, including such well-known conditions as an underdeveloped infrastructure, rampant opportunism, low investment per project, lack of technical skills, and inadequate educational background, the most powerful explanation probably lies in the long-standing repressive film censorship law and regulations in effect. (Boonrak 1992, 81)

Thai cinema has always been closely watched over by censorship authorities, especially for statements against the ideological triangle of nation, religion, king, and for any expressions potentially critical of government rule. Mainstream genre cinema thus has generally avoided giving offense or potential offense, or even alluding to Thai politics. Instead, it opts for escapism and so-called pure entertainment, transporting audiences far from the reality of current or past state affairs and rigorously fulfilling its role as dream factory. Throughout the decades of its existence, Thai cinema has reproduced ideological stability, reconfirming social and moral values in accordance with the public image of Thainess shaped and approved by the government.

It is no coincidence that an important part of Thai genre formula is the closed form, the definite end each movie has, with the moral often being clearly stated (Juree 2003, 162). Open endings are uncommon and usually confuse the audience, as it is unfamiliar with storylines that are not clearly and unambiguously resolved. Similarly, films that are deemed too naturalistic in content, form and style generally do not fare well at the box office, as they differ too strongly from audience expectations. Since the popular concept of a movie is that of entertainment that provides a pleasant mood and a happy ending, viewing something that does not follow this concept seems pointless, even unwise.<sup>37</sup>

As Neale points out, the «narrative image» of films – their presentation to the public via advertising, such as trailers, posters, press presentations, and so on – is created by the industry discourse in order to give an idea of what audiences should expect of the product (Neale 1980, 163). In this context, it is telling that Thai mainstream cinema is presented in a very clear-cut manner: the narrative image generated by the production and

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<sup>37</sup> Pimpaka Towira, in a conversation with the author, February 2004.

distribution companies leave no doubt which genre the movie belongs to and which audience it targets. The clarity and unambiguity of the films' public image are an industry tool to maximize certainty as to the films' market performance.

This becomes even clearer in comparison to the presentation of independent films. Their freer structures, experimental forms, and low-budget production aesthetics make for narrative images that are harder to read in a clear-cut way, and cannot be clearly placed in terms of genre and plotline. For example, the trailer for *Phom chue Chart* (*Lost Nation*, Zart Tancharoen, 2009) begins with hand-held camera shots wildly reeling through a jungle, followed with point-of-view shots of flowers, the sky, and animals, without clarifying whose point of view this is. The coherence of the images is hard to find, they seem random until we realize the film is about the search for a lost person.



Stills from the trailer for *Phom chue Chart*

The camera then captures portraits of people whose roles remain unclear. Instead of the classic voice-over that usually comments on film trailers, there are unclassifiable noises and faraway voices, their speakers unseen. At times there is simply silence. Needless to say, no stars are shown or credited; in fact, we do not even see the film's protagonist. The disorientation that the trailer evokes transmits the sense of being lost, making it palpable.

*Lost Nation* is about a man called Chart who gets lost in the jungle. The story is told from the perspective of his family and friends, who discuss his disappearance, speculate about his fate, search for him and retrace his last steps. On a search trip to the mountainous jungle where Chart has vanished, his friends confront the wilderness and the challenge it represents to rationality. The film conjures up an image of its missing protagonist through the search for him. All the while, he remains unseen, a ghost-like presence hovering over the depicted events. It is only toward the end that we catch a glimpse of Chart: seen from a distance, a lone male figure wanders through the jungle alongside a stream. He seems comfortable and at ease in these surroundings. As the camera remains still, Chart walks away, disappearing into the foliage.

As mentioned in chapter 2, Chart is a male name and at the same time the Thai word for nation, adding a political subtext.

Clearly, independent cinema is more involved in making political statements than the mainstream. As previously mentioned, these films are thus confronted with the issue of censorship in a way the mainstream avoids, even below the surface, by sticking to formulaicism. The political has always occupied a marginal space in Thai cinema, with the one exception being the 1970s. During this short time, the country saw a rise in movies that were engaged in social commentary and examined issues such as upcountry hardship, poverty, petty crime and lack of education. The emergence of these films was influenced by the «culture of dissent» that had originated in the USA and Europe in the mid-1960s, leading to student uprisings, protest movements and the flourishing of subcultures, and resonated worldwide (Anchalee 2001, 143ff.). Cinematically, the rise of youth culture and student reforms coincided with New Waves in various countries. It was in this context that Thai cinema encountered social realism, adapting it to portray the lives of the unprivileged and the socially marginalized (Sirichai 1988, 136 and 171ff.). For example, *Tone* (Piak Poster, 1970) tells the story of a rape victim; *Khao chue Karn* (*A Man Called Karn*, Chatree Chalerm Yukol, 1973) portrays the difficult working conditions of an upcountry doctor. Some films from this era adapt typical subject matter of social realism, while combining it with the flavor-structured plotlines of traditional Thai genre cinema.



Toward the end of the 1970s, social realism fizzled out. This was related to a conservative turn in the country's rule: The student revolution of 1973 inaugurated a brief, unstable period of democracy, with military rule being reimposed after a massacre in October 1976, when the military violently beat back student riots. After this repression of democracy, a rightist junta seized power, and the public expression of social and political criticism was strongly discouraged. Social realism in film generally declined and only lived on in the work of individual directors, among them Wichit Kounavudhi and Chatree Chalerm Yukol.

### **Contemporary Thai Genres**

After the brief period of social realism, genre cinema grew back strongly, as the industry returned to its habitual working mode and formulas. It saw a growth due to a government decision in 1977 to increase taxes on foreign films by more than tenfold, which resulted in a collective distributors' boycott of foreign films that lasted until 1981. During this time, Thai production greatly increased, reaching up to 160 films per year.

In 1993, the film import tax was greatly reduced. American imports surged, and the multiplex era began. In response to Hollywood market dominance, the Thai industry emulated blockbuster culture. Huge entertainment conglomerates reinforced the star system, introducing pop music stars into the film sector. Since then, major production companies have monopolized the business, sharing ownership of movie theaters, record and film companies, production labs and studios.

From the mid-1990s onwards, adaptations of genres from the USA and East Asia have become more straightforward. According to film scholar and critic Kittisak Suwannapokin, Thai cinema increasingly imitates foreign successes to obtain high box office revenue. As a result, he says, Thai movies assimilate more and more to foreign film style, to the point of losing touch with the cinematic history of their country of origin. Recent thrillers, such as *Bangkok Dangerous* (Danny and Oxide Pang, 1999), copy the look of Hong Kong cop movies; some auteur films, like Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Ruang Rak Noi Nid Mahasan* (*Last Life in the Universe*, 2004), lean toward Japanese

arthouse cinema; and much of mainstream action directly adapts Hollywood action or Chinese and Japanese martial arts films.<sup>38</sup>

The assimilation of foreign genres is especially apparent in the ghost and horror genre. Since Japanese horror movies became popular worldwide in the 1990s, Thailand has seen a ghost film production boom. The genre has always been popular with domestic audiences; recently, production companies have aimed to also reach foreign markets newly interested in Asian horror films. As Thai cinema becomes transnationally oriented, the ghost genre evolves: compared to the traditional ghost genre's mixing of scares, laughs and romance, recent ghost movies such as *Phii Sam Bat* (*Bangkok Haunted*, Oxide Pang and Pisut Praesangeam, 2001) or *Shutter* (Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, 2004), often tend towards more linear plotlines, concentrating on the supernatural element of the story and psychologizing the ghost character. This new seriousness is complemented by a high-end aesthetics, with atmospheric detail shots and reduced color schemes, reminiscent of the sleek, minimalistic look of Japanese ghost movies.

In the wake of the growing transnationality of Thai cinema, storylines of all genres see a more linear treatment. The traditional story structure of multi-flavored genres is still present in popular genres, albeit on a smaller scale. The contemporary mainstream production is multilayered: there are globalized genres made for export to urban audiences with a taste for Western and world cinema, and there is popular cinema that follows traditional genre patterns, made for audiences that enjoy Thai-style entertainment. Furthermore, there is genre deconstruction, practised by semi-independent films – movies that are independently produced, but distributed via mainstream production companies to large audiences. This production branch arose after 1997 and was dubbed New Thai Cinema; one of its novelties lay in its reflection of indigenous film history. Thus, it often uses genre stereotypes and formulas, turning them into pastiche or parody. While *Buppah Ratree* ironizes the traditional ghost genre, *Hua Jai Toranong* (*The Adventures of Iron Pussy*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Michael Shaowanasai,

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<sup>38</sup> Kittisak Suwannapokin, in a conversation with the author, March 2004.

2003) parodizes the spy thriller, musical and melodrama, and *Ruang Talok 69* (Sixty-nine, Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 19995) introduces gangster stereotypes into its plotline.

In general, contemporary Thai cinema shows an interesting variety of older genre structures, shaped by indigenous drama and popular viewing habits, and layered over with foreign, especially Hollywood, influences in manifold ways, alongside freer structures apparent in independent cinema. All the while, creative restrictions formed by the industry's commercialism and the impact of censorship remain dominant. It remains to be seen how future developments will influence genre structures and whether the historically based genres will continue to exist with their specific narrative structures and basic units that differ from the newer, more globalized genre forms.

### 3.3 Characters and Acting Style

As we have seen in the previous chapters, Thai audiences have, over time, developed a high level of familiarity with recurring storylines and genre formulas. Both of these characteristics are centered on an inventory of formulaic characters. While many are well-known to the audience as characters from preexisting popular tales, folklore and legends, others appear familiar because of their stereotypicality, having been designed and portrayed in a similar manner in many films and plays before. This chapter examines character design and the acting style in Thai cinema.

#### Characters as Stereotypes

Mahesuan, a character from *Fah Talai Jone (Tears of the Black Tiger)*, Wisit Sasanatieng, 2000), is a mean-spirited, violent gangster and the hero's opponent – in short, the archetypal villain. He never lets his badness be doubted. It is even made clear apart from his actions, by his very appearance and behavior. The cowboy attire, the cigarettes he smokes, and the pencil-thin moustache all hark back to the typical character of the ruthless gangster from 1960s Thai action films, set in scene as evil counterpart of the virtuous antihero. Perhaps the most telling attribute is his evil, staccato laugh that seems pressed and fake, expressive of malicious joy. It is a typical expression of the villain gangster character since the 1960s gangster action films and is also found in more recent takes on the good guy-bad guy motif, as well as in countless soap operas, making each successor of the character prototype immediately recognizable as a remodelling. *Tears of the Black Tiger* depicts this character as a parody, ironizing it by emphasizing the artificiality of its traditional attributes. The moustache, for example, is fake, the laugh seems staged, and the facial expression and gestures appear exaggerated and theatrical. The exaggeration of the attributes turns the character into a kind of humorous homage to the generic gangster character. Appropriately, the character of Fai, the senior gangster boss, is played by Sombat Methanee, an iconic Thai actor of the 1960s and 1970s who starred in villain roles during a certain period of his career, becoming a prototype for many nearly identical bad guy gangsters to have populated Thai cinema since its classic era in the 1950s.



Prototypical villain characters from *Fah talai jone* and *Hua jai toranong* (below left)

Contemporary and historical mainstream Thai film tends to design characters as stereotypes rather than psychologically complex beings modelled on a notion of a realistic person. It is immediately clear to the audience which actor represents which character archetype. From previous viewing experiences, the audience knows the role each character will inhabit in the story and is familiar with the typical traits of each archetype. Thus, the course of events is more or less laid out right from the beginning, and the dynamics of the story are prestructured. Archetypal characters are linked to genre formulas: a genre determines character, and vice versa. Each genre calls for a specific set of characters. Since genre formulas reproduce storylines, characters roughly follow the scheme of action and the character psychology displayed by their prototype.

### **Archetypal Characters in Thai Drama**

The typification of characters can be traced back to *khon* and *lakhon*, the traditional Thai art of masked and dance drama. *Khon* drama is based on the tale of the Ramakien, the Thai version of the Ramayana, the Indian verse epic. It tells the story of Prince Rama, his wife Sida and the battles between the rival cities of Ayutthaya, capital of the gods, and

Langka, city of the demons. All performances of *khon* feature the Ramakien, one of the cornerstones of Thai literature. Dance drama, *lakhon*, covers a wider range of stories than *khon*, including folk tales and Jataka stories. The character inventory consists of recurring archetypes such as the handsome hero, *phra ek*, and the beautiful heroine, *nang ek*, the villain, *phu rai*, a jealous female antagonist and rival of the heroine, *nang itcha*, and *tua talok*, the all-important clown or comic relief (Mattani 1983, 14). This is especially the case in *lakhon nok* (folk dance-drama of central Thailand), as opposed to the characters in *lakhon nai* (dance-drama of the Thai royal court), who have more psychological complexity and depth (Mattani 1983, 11). In both forms, however, each character has its own unique, characteristic way of expression through gesture and speech. The *nang ek* heroine will move gracefully and demurely, and her speech will be refined and elegant. The character of Hanuman, the monkey god-warrior, will move acrobatically, with many jumps, and occasionally scratch himself. In contrast to the hero's noble and restrained mode of speaking and tone of voice, the villain's is direct and aggressive, while that of the clown is joking and sometimes crude, bordering on the vulgar.

The typology is further enhanced by the performers' attire: they wear headdresses, costumes and, in certain types of drama, masks that represent their characters in an iconic way. Thus, the audience recognizes each character instantly, along with its fixed attributes and character traits that remain constant throughout the play. The characters' true nature is reflected in their physical appearance, which becomes a manifestation of their inner selves. Mary L. Grow interprets this typification of characters as the expression of a Theravada Buddhist worldview:

The deceptive nature of appearances is a major theme in Buddhist doctrine, which postulates that the phenomenal world of everyday experience is illusory, that it is filled with ignorance and misconception. In *lakhon chatri* dance-dramas, performers recreate this experience by manipulating aesthetic media to construct a set of characters who are adversaries embodying good and evil, divine and demonic. (Grow 1996, 50)

The essentialist conception of clearly typified characters goes hand in hand with a rigid moral judgment. In the fictional worlds created by Thai drama, there exists an absolute value system; Good and Evil both have clear representatives, and their actions are governed by the rule of cause and effect: according to the law of karma, good deeds call

forth goodness, and bad deeds generate badness. Thus, truth – truthfulness, meaning freedom from illusion, as well as metaphysical truth that reveals itself through divine grace – is manifested not only in the characters, but also in their actions and fate. It is the intention of Thai classical dramatic forms, especially *khon*, to give political, social, moral and religious instruction to the audience. The religious background and educational aims are obvious, even if they are often softened and interrupted by comic relief (Mattani 1983, 8).

*Khon* and *lakhon* are highly formalized and convey a view of the (fictional) world as structured by higher orders – those of society, and ultimately, the moral principles of *dhamma*, the Buddhist moral system underlying the cosmos as well as the human world and its everyday life. The recitation of the text, the performance, can be compared to what Roland Barthes identifies as a «mythical speech», composed of «material which has already been worked on as to make it suitable for communication»: the content is pre-shaped by the speaker's desire to conform to the values of moral order (Barthes 1984, 110). The performers' recitation, accented by characteristic dance gestures and music, is highly structured, and its formalism projects specific images that are essential to convey the ideology of the drama to the audience.

This formalism also has an impact on the expression of emotions:

As (*lakhon*) performers assemble and project aesthetic media, they create a world that is eternal and fixed, a golden era that only gives voice to a traditional authority, and ultimately denies events their historical realism. This denial of a sense of realism is further maintained by a particular attitude surrounding emotion. Because performers sing the text in a very specific way, they are not only restricted linguistically, but also emotionally. An attitude of 'cool-heartedness' (*jai yen*) is projected at all times as performers portray characters who self-consciously remain detached from volatile behaviour and exhibit emotion indirectly through dance and musical accompaniment. Even though a performer's character might sing of despair, jealousy, and anger, the performer gives the appearance of remaining at the center of control. Hence, the characters portrayed in the recitation of the text give the impression that they understand that negative actions have the potential to generate negative karma.<sup>39</sup> (Grow 1996, 57)

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<sup>39</sup> The attitude of *jai yen*, literally (having a) cool heart, is valued in Thai society as an ideal state of mind most people aim to cultivate and practice in daily life. Socially, it is

Thus, high formalization helps display and practice detachment, seen as an ideal state of mind, by creating distance between the story and the character as well as the audience. The characters, by being archetypes, never lose their moral obligation towards the audience, but, in their ensemble, exist as a kind of exemplary matrix of human behaviour. By transporting ideals, they are functional, acting in the service of the performance's educational aim.<sup>40</sup> The characters exist in order to represent abstract principles, higher forces, and metaphysical and moral laws.

By its nature, orality's characteristic aggregative discourse corresponds to the formulaicism of Thai genre cinema and to its stereotypical characters, echoing the oral residue in contemporary Thai culture: highly formulaic, standard attributions are repeatedly bound to characters, reproducing stereotypes.

### **Character Psychology in Television and Film**

Today, character archetypes continue to prevail as a tendency in mainstream Thai films and television drama (Mattani 1983, 13). For example, Fai and Mahesuan in *Tears of the Black Tiger* are modelled on the *phu rai*, the villain character, whereas the character of Dum, the tragic protagonist and romantic lead, represents the *phra ek*, the virtuous male hero. Nearly every TV series, whether set in the past or the present day, features a beautiful heroine struggling against the intrigues and schemes of her malevolent female rival, a hero who must deal with tragic twists of fate, and comic relief—often provided by a *kathoey*, a transvestite or transsexual. Along with other characters based on major archetypes originating from *lakhon* and mixed with Western pop culture, these characters form the basic personnel of every TV drama and thus «update the mythic essence of ancient drama» (Cornwel-Smith 2005, 238). It is hardly a coincidence that the Thai word for soap opera is *lakhon thorathat* or *lakhon teevee*, demonstrating that traditional drama

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thought to avoid conflict and accompanying embarrassment. Hence, expressing passionate emotions is frowned on in Thai society.

<sup>40</sup> This development took place between 1910 and 1925, under the reign of King Vajiravudh (King Rama VI), who reformed Thai drama, giving it an educational and political role. The character archetypes, however, are in the tradition of ancient Thai drama (Mattani 1983, 157ff.).



is still very influential in the modern-day Thai entertainment world (Mattani 1983, 14). The film and television industry has been directly and strongly influenced by the theater: During World War II, foreign films were not allowed into the country, making theater the sole public entertainment. This «golden age of Thai theater», as it is often referred to, went into decline in the late 1940s when foreign films were re-introduced into cinemas and the local film industry blossomed. As the film industry became an attractive and financially rewarding new field of employment, many directors, actors and playwrights switched over (Mattani 1983, 202).

The tendency of characters designed as types stands in close connection with the convention of rigid genre structures that have always played an important role in mainstream Thai film. A consequence of fixed character traits is a predictable story: as mentioned earlier, the archetypes determine story developments. The audience thus has clear expectations from the beginning on about which turns the story will take. This corresponds to the fixed stories (and often plots) that make up the major part of Thai drama and are retold time and again – thus, the audience becomes familiar with the story repertoire (Fouquet 1988, 253).

The classical Thai romance, for example, usually evolves between a poor hero and a rich heroine, or vice versa. Differences in background, wealth, lifestyle and social status become major obstacles in the budding love affair, often making a happy ending unthinkable. Among the standard character inventory are the heroine's stern father and concerned mother, as well as the heroine's jealous rival and the hero's morally dubious acquaintances. Owing to this character constellation, the development of events during the plot is pretty much a given from the beginning: The romantic encounter of boy and girl will soon be troubled by an inappropriate social context, so that the couple will be forced to meet secretly, and all kinds of problems will ensue.

A comedy, on the other hand, is shaped and defined by the comedians who star in it. It is, by definition, a film with comedians, and owes its humor to their specific performance (Fouquet 1988, 176). Thai cinematic mainstream comedies almost always star well-known comedians with a career in stage, television or film comedic acting; some of these comedians have their own television shows and are national icons. Their very appearance

on stage or screen signifies that the following play or film will be humorous. Moreover, comedians often have their own special trademark kind of humor, concentrating on, for example, puns, slapstick or satire.

While the typified character inventory and the strict genre conventions are typical of Thai mainstream, independent cinema displays more psychologically complex characters, alongside with freer plot structures. Avant-garde, arthouse and short films tend to model characters with more depth, detailed backstories and sometimes even enigmatic features. As examples, the thriller *Kuen rai ngao* (*One Night Husband*, Pimpaka Towira, 2003) inquires into the psychology of its individually designed characters and lets the plot unfold in conjunction with the inner journey of the film's heroine. After her husband disappears just after their marriage, she follows the traces he left and discovers that he is not the person she thought he was. This discovery gradually leads her to rethink her own identity, even as it opens up a series of new experiences.

Taking character complexity a step further, *Sud Pralat* (*Tropical Malady*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004) dives so deeply into its protagonists' souls that they at times become mysterious creatures, whose puzzling actions and perceptions make the plot hard or at times impossible to understand rationally.

The social realist films of the 1970s are another, earlier exception to mainstream character design. Their characters show the standard emotional reactions of mainstream genres, but depth is added by the use of a more naturalistic acting style, giving the characters more credibility and a psychological backstory that explains their actions and reactions. Thus, the social background of the characters becomes an important aspect of the plot (Sirichai 1988).

As Seymour Chatman points out, Formalist film theory defines a character as a product of a plot, as participant or actant. Seen in this way, characters have clearly functional status. The aspects of a character are its functions in the narrative system of the plot, the ways in which it causes the story to evolve. This is, however, only a part of what interests audiences in character. We also appreciate character traits for their own sake. This is especially true for cinematic modernity, in which characters not only have more

numerous traits but also differ greatly in quality. Modernity sees a shift in character design and preference, from the stereotypical to the individualized:

What gives the modern fictional character the particular kind of illusion acceptable to modern taste is precisely the heterogeneity or even scatter in his personality. (...) the contemplation of character is the predominate pleasure in modern art narrative. It depends on the convention of the uniqueness of the individual, but that is a convention no less than the older insistence on the predominance of action. (Chatman 1978, 112)

In modern, psychological narratives, actions are expressions or symptoms of personality that lie at the core of the narrative: the personality of one or several characters is the source from which the story springs forth. This notion of psychological narrative replaces older forms that center on generic principles and archaic systems of value and belief.

In apsychological narratives, actions exist in their own right, independently, and serve as sources of pleasure for the audience. While psychological narratives are concerned with the subject, as a seat of the individuality of the human psyche, apsychological narratives focus on the predicate, on actions and the rule of cause and effect that governs them.

Thus, «when a trait is cited in an apsychological narrative, its consequence must immediately follow. (...) The characters are deprived of choice, and become in a real sense mere automatic functions of the plot.» (Chatman 1978, 114)

Character traits define the way characters think and act; therefore, in apsychological narratives according to Chatman, stereotypical characters think and act in predictable ways, displaying a one-dimensionality that defines the course of the storyline and the flavor of the scene. Since both the individual scenes and the storyline as a whole obey the rules and formulas of genre conventions, the stereotypicality of characters serve these conventions. Characters, their developments and the emotions they display are thought to represent rather than to convey sensations and emotions toward the audience. If the romantic couple in a tragic love story suffers because of the impossibility of their love, they do so in a highly formalized way. This display of emotions is not made to surprise and move the audience by way of intricately acted individual emotions; rather, it represents a standardized narrative situation and conveys the principle that a love match should be made on equal social terms in order to be approvable. Apsychological narrative works not so much through an empathic positioning of the viewers' subject toward the

characters, but rather through the knowledge of social and narrative conventions and genre formulas.

Though the characters in Thai drama and mainstream film tend towards what Chatman describes as *apsychological*, it must be specified that they are not designed as entirely apart from the concept of character psychology. The components that make up their psychology are partly externalized: conflicts are not internal, but impose themselves from the outside. Problems and conflicts arise from situational circumstances, calling for an external reaction based on a clear-cut, generalized notion of character psychology. For instance, the innocent hero is challenged by ill-meaning adversaries, finds himself in conflict, feels betrayed and fearful and is forced to react. Or, the protagonist of a comedy gets tricked by his sidekicks, is made a fool of and reacts with comic anger, trying to get back at his friends and making an even bigger fool of himself. The reactions to external events are accompanied and guided by standardized emotional reactions that correspond to the stereotype of the character and the genre conventions.

To viewers accustomed to psychologically complex characters, *apsychological* narratives might seem odd or simplistic because they do not operate according to the notion of individual psychology and to an understanding of behaviour based on free will and individual decisions. The «scatter in personality» Chatman speaks of is absent. This helps call to mind the fact that the notion of the uniqueness of a person or character, be it fictional or real-life, is based on the idea of individual sets of character traits. These sets, however, are to a certain extent imaginary. Since they are based on underlying schemata of consistent personalities, they are often subject to simplification and reduction.

Deviations of a fictional character from its general modes of behaviour quickly become confusing for the audience, and thus are usually only permitted to occur if they are thought to make sense in the general development of the plot. The outline of a character is always artificial, in the sense that this outline follows a systematized idea of character psychology as a whole and avoids obstacles in the conception and description of the character. For this reason, characters designed with a complex individual psychology and «scatter in personality» are themselves usually systematized, in the sense that they are

created to serve story development. This puts into perspective a perception of psychological characters as being more realistic than apsychological ones. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that character traits, and the valuation they are subjected to, are always culturally coded. Each culture and epoch characterizes human qualities according to the standards of its norms (Chatman 1978, 174ff.). Passion, for example, is regarded to some extent as a positive quality in general European perception, since it stands for the ability of the self to express emotions clearly and directly. Thai thinking, however, views passion as lack of restraint, a possible cause for social disruption and the disturbance of harmony. The cultural coding of character traits further relativizes the idea that any kind of character design is more «valid» or realistic than another.

### **Acting Style**

The archetypical characters featured in narratives are enhanced by a specific acting style that aims at underlining the archetypes. In Thai drama, actors are cast by type in an extreme sense: they are selected for one specific role by body and character type. They will study this role intensely, from the age of ten or twelve on, for many years, and play it for several reruns. For instance, a *khon* actor cast to represent Hanuman, the monkey god in the *Ramakien*, will usually play this role during his entire stage career. It is unthinkable that he would change to a different role, since his whole training as an actor is aligned toward the portrayal of Hanuman. The art of acting is passed on orally from the teacher, a former actor, to the student according to their role.<sup>41</sup> The aim of teaching is to shape the students' performance on the ideal performance as closely as possible.

The acting style is based on an ideal character type. The gestures, facial expressions, and movements are determined by this ideal, so there exists a notion of the ideal performance for each role. Deviation from this ideal and reinterpretation of the role are usually not

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<sup>41</sup> This mode of teaching is common in the arts of other Asian cultures as well, such as the Peking Opera. The oral mode of passing on knowledge implicitly means these arts need to be performed in order to be preserved.

sought after in classical Thai drama. The physical aspect of the performance is important: Gestures symbolize moods and emotions. They indicate meaning, substituting for the use of dialogue. The actors' appearances, performances and expressions follow strict standards:

The recitation of the text is highly formalized. The poetic structure of *khlong* verse form and the contents of text, mediated through a narrator, dictate what is to be said and when. Linguistic choices are therefore extremely limited. The method of delivery also requires performers to use a particular vocal style and to express the emotion of their characters in symbolic dance gestures that are executed while specific melodies are played by the musicians. Singing the text is thus a highly structured artistic form, and deviation from it is not an option. (Grow 1996, 55)

These typified performances are, in the understanding of classical Thai drama, «realistic» (Pornpimol 2006, 154). In this context, realism is not understood as naturalism or psychological depth, but as a convincing representation of the archetype of a character, including the adequate gesture and mode of speech, all of which are expected and thus believed by the audience.

The typification and formalization of the acting style is similar in film and television. In mainstream genre movies, actors have stereotypical roles and play them as such. This is widely understood as good acting, also because it remains in keeping with the genre and the expectations it raises. Each genre has its archetypical character set. Performances are based on the ideal, commonplace, collective notion of what each character archetype looks like and how it behaves. Just as each stage actor trained for the role of Hanuman aims to portray him ideally, film actors are usually specialized in a certain role stereotype – the beautiful heroine, the comedic clown, the stern father – and strive after an appearance and a performance that perfectly corresponds to the image of the stereotype. Acting out stereotypes calls for making their gesture, facial expression and their display of emotions clearly comprehensible. As in drama, the use of costume plays an important part in creating unambiguity: the way a character dresses always reflects his or her self. While the romantic heroine dresses prettily and demurely, her counterpart, the jealous woman who tries to break up the romantic couple, normally wears flamboyant colors, patterns and jewelry as well as an extravagant hairstyle. The leading couple is always portrayed as well groomed and attractive, even in unlikely circumstances: Heroes

sometimes wear suits during the whole film, regardless of the tropical climate, and heroines remain spectacularly made-up even after being drenched in the monsoon rain or when portrayed as poor country girls (Sirichai 1988, 139). In a scene showing the birth of their child, the heroine might well be in full make-up and the hero in a suit.<sup>42</sup> Regardless of the situation they are in, characters dress according to their social status: Royals always wear crowns, and bus drivers always wear caps (Sirichai 1988 and Fouquet 1988, 98).

Similarly, mime and gesture are standardized to help typify the character. Emotions are coded: for each character archetype, there are characteristic emotions and emotional reactions, and for each emotion, there is a prototypical expression. Villains will, of course, fly into a rage quickly; the hero will react to problems in a calm, yet determined way; the jealous female character will behave extravagantly and react hysterically. In order to portray emotions in the clearest, most unambiguous way, actors often resort to a highly expressive mode of work which results in a «Thai style of over-the-top-acting» (Anchalee 2001, 142). To quote Chalida Uabumrungjit, project director of the Thai Film Foundation and festival director of the Thai Short Film and Video Festival,

The expression of emotions in most Thai movies is uniquely Thai. There are awkward attempts to portray situations that don't happen in reality. (Thai movies) have the pattern of anger, love and other emotions in mind and express it in a way that most people would never do in real life. For example, most Thais don't say «I love you» directly like in the movies. They just look into each other's eyes, and know it. (Chalida, in Anchalee 1997)

This style is taken to extremes in the *lakhon teevee* mentioned above, the soap operas, that feature intense emotions in an intense style. Anger, love and desperation are portrayed in a direct, explicit way that critical viewers interpret as a denial of Thai values (Cornwel-Smith 2005, 239): its garishness, which involves frequent use of highly physical expressions such as slapping, sobbing, and shouting, stands in strong contrast to the restrained, formalized emotions of traditional *lakhon* mentioned above and the ideal of emotional control. This new style can be understood, however, as a new formalized mode of expression. As in the traditional restrained acting style, codes enable the

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<sup>42</sup> Dome Sukwong, in a conversation with the author, March 2004.

generalization of emotions, making them universally understandable and letting the audience participate in emotional reactions.<sup>43</sup>

Another possible reason for the formalized «over the top» acting style might lie in the historical practice of dubbing. Between the postwar years and the mid-Seventies, movies were shot on silent film stock for economic reasons. The voices were added later, during the screening by live dubbers or, from the 1970s on, in the studio during postproduction (Chalida 2001, 131). Knowing their physical appearance was recorded without their voice, actors might have tended to emphasize their gestures and facial expressions rather than rely on their voice and dialogue for expressivity. The synchronized voices added later usually had a certain artificial flatness of sound created by the acoustics of studio recording. Also, dialogue was spoken in a stylized way to match the stereotypical characters: Each character had a characteristic manner of speech and intonation – similar to the mode of speaking in *lakhon*. Thus, the mode of synchronized speech reinforces the acting style and vice versa, and the artificiality of the sound emphasizes the impression of an exaggerated performance.

### **Acting Schools and the Star System**

There seems to be a kind of «learning by doing» approach to acting. Actors are often employed for their attractive looks, rather than for their acting abilities. Many receive their education from acting at a theater or have not studied acting beforehand at all. This even applies to the most famous actor couple in Thai film history: Mitr Chaibancha worked in the Thai air force before his acting career, and his partner Petchara Chaowarat was discovered at a beauty contest.

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<sup>43</sup> Alexandra Schneider (2005, 148ff.) mentions a similar acting style and conception of character in Hindi mainstream film. She supposes that the exaggerated portrayal of emotions makes up for missing psychological depth of the characters. Perhaps the development from a restrained towards a highly expressive portrayal of emotions is connected to the reception of Indian film; another possible source is the discourse of the melodramatic adapted from the Hollywood melodramas widely viewed in Thailand in the 1950s and 1960s.



Since the 1950s, roles have been cast and acted by type. Often, the only direction given to actors was to tell the actors which lines to speak (Sirichai 1988, 139). Dialogue was standardized and clearly linked to certain emotions and their equally standardized expression – all the more so because of the practice of dubbing, which separated the spoken voice from the actors' physical appearance at the moment of shooting. This was made possible by simple and clear-cut stories that called for repetition of the familiar. The role types were additionally emphasized by costume, similar to costume in *lakhon*. The types certain actors represented changed in the course of their career, adapting to their changing real-life appearance. As an example, Wilaiwan Wattanaphanit appeared in melodramas as the beautiful love interest in her youth and in later years as a mother figure, while the action hero Sombat Methanee switched to villain roles over time.

The stereotypic mode of acting must also be understood in the context of film as mass product. The Thai industry has taken the star system to extremes, featuring its favourite stars in as many movies as possible at the height of their fame and causing them to sometimes work on different film sets on the same day (Rayns 1988, 193 and Lent 1990, 219). Mitr Chaibancha, as an example, was said to be working on up to twenty movies simultaneously at the peak of his career in the 1960s (Anchalee 2001, 142). Under such extreme working conditions, it is hardly imaginable how he could have differentiated between a variety of psychological characters. Any role preparation prior to shooting seems hard to imagine.

In this understanding, the attraction and the selling point of a movie lies less in an actor's ability to portray various characters than simply in his or her appearance on screen. The value of the actors' performance lies in their status as *dara nang*, famous, glamorous movie stars and public icons, and in portraying characters that correspond to their aura as stars. As larger-than-life idols, they represent entertainment value in themselves. As Dome Sukwong, head of the Thai National Film Archive, states:

In the old days, Thai people saw movies as they would see traditional *likay* dance: they wanted something unreal, something bigger or smaller than what they experienced in everyday life. They looked for a dream. Mitr and Petchara rose to fame during dictatorial governments, and they provided real escape to the people. (Dome, in Kong 2005)

Today, looks, popularity and star value continue to count for a great deal, even though the traditional star system has lost its grip on the film industry: stars are no longer mythic icons whose fame persists for decades.<sup>44</sup> Instead, a steady stream of young starlets supplies the entertainment industry with the thrill of the new – the film and television industry is well aware of the value of continually introducing newcomers as the next generation of young, attractive stars, mostly comprised of former pop singers and models without acting training. Some young actors attend acting schools abroad, although this is not a prerequisite to work in Thai film and television. Instead, newcomers tend to grasp for fame by imitating the stereotypic acting style of genre formulas, which helps their career by allowing them to fit easily into the industry's genre system.

Western methods of modern acting in the style of psychological realism were not taught in Thailand until the 1970s, when universities began to be influenced by Stanislavsky, combining his method with Thai elements. The universities staged plays that were mostly adaptations or translations of Western classics and modern plays set in contemporary or historical periods of Thailand or other Asian countries (Mattani 1983, 13). These mainly catered to the intellectual elite and the middle class. The interest in more naturalistic, realistic acting might well stand in context with wider cultural influences from Europe in the 1970s, such as the social realist film wave that blossomed in Thailand and took its impetus from similar European New Wave movements. This movement flickered out in the 1980s due to political restrictions and economic demands, and genre films took back the market, with a clear return to stereotypical characters and acting. Today, Western theater and acting largely remains the domain of university theater groups, while the general public prefers plays and films that draw on traditional Thai theater.

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<sup>44</sup> Kong Rithdee (2005) sees a cause for this in the rise of tabloid culture and its desire for a constant supply of fresh faces, as well as in the dominance of television since the 1970s. Without a doubt, the transformation of the Thai star system is part of a larger development, as described by Bauman's concept of liquid modernity (2000). Since social forms and institutions are subject to rapid change and no longer have time to solidify, long-term developments are increasingly obsolete.

### 3.4 Narrators and the Gestures of Narration

Recent Thai cinema features a remarkable multitude of filmic narrators. They appear frequently, and in an amazing variety. The following chapter examines the effect they have on filmic narration and inquires into reasons for their popularity. It also studies their relation to traditional Thai narrating authorities, the ways this relation influences their role and status, and the links between the modes of narrating and genre formulas.

#### Emphasized Narration

*Monrak Transistor* (Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 2001) tells the story of Paen, a young country boy with a great love of music. He likes to sing at temple fairs in his village, and his carefree, naïve charm and talent for singing make him a born entertainer. At one of these fairs, he falls in love with Sadao. On their wedding day, his present to her is a transistor radio, symbol of his love of songs and of the young couple's happiness.

Soon Paen has to leave his wife in order to serve in the Thai military. In a thoughtless moment, he then deserts the army and runs away to Bangkok to follow his dream of becoming a singer. Lured by false promises, he is stranded as an errand-boy for a mediocre concert agency. Reality catches up with him: many unfortunate twists of fate bring him to a sugar palm plantation as a common laborer and turn him into a petty criminal. Things go from bad to worse, and it is only after long years of suffering, broken dreams and a prison sentence that Paen finally and ruefully returns home to his village and his wife, begging her forgiveness.

The narrator in *Monrak Transistor* is the prison keeper, an old man we see at the film's opening in a jail. He looks and speaks into the camera, telling us that he knows the young man who has just been arrested: it is Paen, who by coincidence comes from the same village as the old man, and whom he would never have expected to see in prison, but isn't life unforeseeable? Paen is, he goes on, a good boy with bad luck who doesn't really belong in prison with dangerous criminals. The old man shakes his head in disbelief as he mutters these thoughts.



The narrator in *Monrak Transistor*

From here, a flashback takes us back to the events that have brought Paen to jail. We meet the narrator again at Paen's and Sadao's wedding, where he briefly walks through a party scene and informs us that Sadao's father finally agreed to the marriage, even though he had doubts about Paen's lively and sometimes disrespectful nature. A little later, over scenes of the married couple's happy life together, the narrator interferes again: «If this were the story's climax, this would be but a charming short movie, and you all would already soon be on your way home again. Forget it! Paen's story is only just beginning...» After this, Paen is ordered to report to the military camp and the story unfolds.

Here, the narrator is a character who has nothing to do with the story and its unfolding but seems to know everything about it. Not only does he know which events happen, he also seems familiar with the protagonist's thoughts and feelings. He relates his own impressions and emotions as well. He is astonished by the strange twists of Paen's life and finds his fate a harsh one, even though he regards Paen as simple and foolish. He not only tells the story, he comments on it as well, expanding his role as narrator.

We get to know this narrator in detail: Not only do we hear his voice, we also see him on screen several times. We learn of his background, his village home and his job as a prison guard. This is all the more remarkable in view of his marginal status in the story. His function as narrator seems to warrant him a place in the film as a character drawn out in detail, even though these details are insignificant in the story context. As a visible

character with a background, the narrator becomes less abstract and more tangible. This helps us to become familiar with him and with the story he tells: we trust him as a narrator because we get to know him a little. Compared to Paen, he is older and more experienced. This gives him a certain calmness and sedateness that enable him to tell the story with detachment and to make moral judgments. Paen lacks this detachment; in fact, his juvenile energy and naïve thoughtlessness serve as the motor of the plot and the starting point for the film's critique of the illusions of show business. Thus, the main character Paen would be an untrustworthy judge of the story, since he has no distance from which to reflect on his mistakes. The narrator is older and wiser, and thus a person of respect.

Recent Thai mainstream films place a strong emphasis on the role of the narrator and the act of narration. More often than not, there will be a narrator of some kind or another, relating the film's story. There is no preferred or dominant form, but a multitude of different kinds of narration: the voice-over belonging to an anonymous speaker who never appears on screen; first- and third-person narrators, speaking in voice-over or while on screen; and sometimes combinations of all of the above in the course of a single film. At times, the narrators' appearance is limited to the beginning and end of the film, framing the plot; in other cases, it continues throughout. Another kind of narrator is introduced in the form of written inserts in between the film images.

### **Personalization, Naturalization and Highly Visible Narrators**

According to Sarah Kozloff, films with narrators can generally be understood as hybrids: they combine cinematic storytelling, a relatively young and technologically complex mode of narration, with oral storytelling, the most ancient, fundamental and familiar mode. Films with narration, especially in the form of a voice-over, superimpose an older form of storytelling on a newer one (Kozloff 1988, 1).

As Kozloff states, a strongly present narrator seems to generate not only what we hear, but also what we see. Thus, the narrator appears as the sole entity behind the filmic narration, responsible for the diegesis (Kozloff 1988, 45). Actually, the question of who

is the original narrator is a highly complex one, since the narration of a film is created by various entities and originates on various levels: besides the audible narration, there is an entity creating the images of the film – the «image-maker» as Kozloff calls him, who is separated from the narrator's voice and, as the original narrator of the film, is not necessarily identical with the audible narrator. There are also entities defined by the working structures of various stages of the production process: the director, the scriptwriter, the editor – or, as is sometimes the case, several of each. The more levels are taken into consideration, the harder it becomes to discern which narrating entity is responsible for which level of the film, and whether a kind of ultimate narrator exists.

In our perception, a narrator's voice shifts from being created by the film, as a part of its audio track and its story design, to being the creator of the film – the voice-entity that calls the images into existence and the source from which the story gradually unfolds. In fact, narration, especially as voice-over, is often used to give the act of filmic storytelling a more natural embedding. Thus, a narrator naturalizes the often abstract and complex entities of filmic narrators; he becomes graspable as a character embedded in the film, relating it to us. By personalizing narration, the character of the narrator «links filmic narration to everyday, dinnertime storytelling» (Kozloff 1988, 48).

*2499 Antapan Krong Muang (Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters*, Nonzee Nimibutr, 1997) is narrated by Piak, an old man who was once a friend of the protagonist Daeng. Piak became a member of Daeng's gang as a youth; he reminisces about the past and moves around in a dusty room that seems to have been abandoned long ago. He uncovers forgotten things, such as pictures of 1950's US icons and an old record player with records. As he plays an Elvis song, the plot goes back to 1956 and shows Daeng and Piak as young men. The narrator thus not only narrates, he also acts as a kind of archaeologist uncovering the paraphernalia of the past. This provides the sequence with picturesque images of nostalgia-laden objects accentuated by a sepia-tinted color frame. Piak's actions also serve as a smooth and elegant transition between the present and the past. In addition, his appearance as a lone and wrinkled elderly man gives the narration

substantial value, since he is a survivor of a drama long past and is willing to give us a first-hand account.

Thus, an obvious effect of the narrators' high visibility is to make the fictional world easily accessible, by personalizing and naturalizing it. As narrators are often eyewitnesses or even participants of the story, they provide a direct link for the audience to enter and to immerse itself in the story, guided by the narrator's presence.

As Seymour Chatman explains, the audibility of narrators and thus their presence in the narrative is shaped by the degree of their visibility. It is therefore «less important to categorize types of narrators than to identify the features that mark their degrees of audibility. A quantitative effect applies: the more identifying features, the stronger our sense of a narrator's presence» (Chatman 1978, 196). A strongly present narrator heightens the impression that it is the narrator who is telling the film's story and that the story lies in his hands entirely. The more remarkable the narrator is, the more we link the story to him, and the stronger the accent on his role and his function is.

While it is usually the function of narrators to dutifully relate the story, rather than to step into the limelight, many narrators in recent Thai films are strikingly prominent and highly visible. For example, *Mah Nakorn* (*Citizen Dog*, Wisit Sasanatieng, 2004) features an almost constant off-screen narration by an anonymous narrator who seems to know everything about the protagonists and the story, including the thoughts and dreams of several characters. This narrator enjoys his job and hardly ever stops talking; the almost constant flow of speech is remarkable.

As another example, *Fan chan* (*My Girl*, Komgrit Threewimol, Songyos Sugmakanan, Nithiwat Tharatorn, Vijja Kojew, Vithaya Thongyuyong, Adisorn Tresirikasem, 2003) is the story of a childhood friendship between a boy called Jeab and his neighbour's daughter Noinaa. Scenes of Jeab as an adult frame the plot. He is about thirty years old and receives an invitation to the wedding party of Noinaa, whom he hasn't seen since childhood. The childhood events follow as a long flashback triggered by Jeab's memories, until the film ends back in the present at the wedding party, where Jeab's

voice-over tells us that his memory of Noinaa, his childhood sweetheart, will always stay with him. This is a classical framing technique of a story that happened in the protagonists' past. The scenes showing them in the present are nevertheless rather detailed, furnishing a large amount of information about Jeab as an adult before the story actually begins and enhancing the emotional impact of the plot, since the plot is rendered as the personal past of a character we have gotten to know in detail as the film sets out. In this way, high visibility and strong presence of a narrator additionally enhance the personalization and naturalization of filmic narration. A detailed portrayal of the traits of the narrating character makes the story graspable and accessible.

At the origins of Thai entertainment culture stands the tradition of oral storytelling, as discussed earlier. Narrators in oral culture are, naturally, highly visible: not only must they be physically present during their performances, they also frequently use their whole range of bodily expression while narrating. Additionally, in various oral cultures including traditional Thai performing culture, they have the right to embellish the story and even to improvise (Chetana 1996, 240). Their creative freedom and their autonomy are great, and making good use of this is regarded highly, as it forms a significant part of the pleasure of attending a performance. The significance of the narrator might even surpass that of the author in oral culture, as the narrator becomes the source of the story each time he retells it. In the context of the story materializing in the present moment, the narrator thus takes over the role of the author as originator. At the root of the narrator's importance in oral culture lies the fact that the word has its existence only in sound, as opposed to in writing, and is therefore bound to the body of the narrator. As Walter Ong points out, the sound of the spoken word is centralizing and unifying: the audience cannot perceive a story without placing a narrator in its center. The relation of stories and knowledge is thereby organized around human and anthropomorphic presence and actions (Ong 1982, 74).

This important function is reflected in the emphasis contemporary Thai film places on its narrators. The naturalization that a highly present voice-over narrator provides the filmic narration with might well account for the popularity of narrators in recent Thai film: the



act of narrating makes a film seem more familiar, because the mode of narrating reverts to the traditional, highly popular form of oral storytelling.

The following example illustrates the emphasized naturalization achieved by a narrating character. *Khon liang chang* (*The Elephant Keeper*, Chatri Chalermluk, 1987) tells the story of Boonsong, a mahout who earns a living by transporting lumber with the help of his elephant Tang-on. As he falls into debt with illegal local lumberjacks, he is increasingly involved in the fights between them and the rangers who try to protect the forest. Kamron, a ranger who owes his life to Boonsong, tries to help him, but the situation turns out to be very difficult and, for the elephant, fatal.

The film portrays the everyday life and the work of the elephant keeper, the rangers and the lumberjacks, with lots of detail and in a documentary style. The film's style leans on the mode of social realism: it shows the destruction of the rain forest as an environmental crime against humans and animals, criticizing it as an irresponsible, short-sighted deed, motivated by greed and lack of ethical thinking. The problem of illegal timber, the situation of the protagonists and their multiple positions are not depicted in a schematic way, but with great nuance. Even action-driven scenes featuring shoot-outs, car chases and elephant stunts draw less on visual spectacle than on observation.

The lighting, costumes and setting appear less glamorous than in most Thai mainstream films. The colors are muted, monochrome earth tones; the acting style is free of mannerisms and aspires to naturalism. The framing and image composition are hardly stylized. All in all, the film's look is natural and unpretentious.

The opening scene of *Khon liang chang* shows a group of people gathered around a campfire in an open field at night. An old man asks the other characters whether they know about the destruction of the rainforest and starts to explain details: the problem of illegal timber, the profits made by selling rare animals and teakwood. As his comrades ask why the teak forest around them looks intact, the man explains that there is a legend about the surrounding woods: people who illegally fell trees are said to be killed by an elephant, as he had witnessed himself, years ago. The camera zooms in on the curious

faces of his audience that asks him to tell them this story. The man puts another log on the fire and begins. At this point, the introductory campfire scene ends, and the plot begins. We are introduced to Boonsong, his elephant and the rangers, from the point of view of the campfire storyteller as a young ranger. The campfire scene continues at the end of the film, framing the plot. After the old ranger has finished telling his story, the narration goes back to being a conversation between him and his audience, as in the opening scene.



Opening scene from *Khon liang chang*

The campfire setting appears like a primeval scene of fictional storytelling. The darkness surrounding the fire creates a space in which the imagination can freely roam. The warm orange light reduces the scenery to the storyteller and the rapt expressions on the faces of the audience, while the intimacy of the campfire circle lends the setting an authentic and cozy atmosphere. The storytelling situation is highly personal, as it builds on the personal memory of the ranger, and thus enhances the film's moral: the spiritual and ecological necessity of respect towards nature. Being a witness, the narrator acts as a guarantor of the truth of the story. Moreover, his presence underlines the moral and makes it easily accessible to the audience: not only does he mediate the story, he answers questions and explains details. He is a reliable authority respected by all, as well as a gifted entertainer, and thus the archetypal narrator.

### **Narration About Narration: Self-Awareness**

Some narrators do not shy away from commenting on their story, such as the narrator from *Monrak Transistor* mentioned earlier, who announces himself as narrator and repeatedly comments on the lead character's background and fate as well as the audience's expectations for the further development of the plot. A similar example is the loquacious narrator in *Mah Nakorn*, who starts out by announcing the story of Pod, a young man from the country, who is, as the narrator tells us, not very smart and lacks experience. In the narrator's opinion, it is no great surprise that his life will not be easy as he heads to Bangkok to make a living.

In fact, various forms of narrator commentary, like interpretation, judgment, or contextualization of the story, appear frequently in recent Thai cinema. Commentary takes the narrator's self-inscription into the story a step further than the relating of plot incidents, as it carries a stronger expression of the narrator's personality than the primary function of narration. In the opinion of Seymour Chatman, commentary is the most striking position a narrator can take: by commenting, the narrator's voice is conveyed more distinctly than by any other feature short of explicit self-mention (Chatman 1978, 228). By setting himself apart from the story, the narrator gains superiority through critical distance and grows beyond his role of serving the story and audience, becoming an authority with an opinion and the right, literally, to make it heard. In some cases, this powerful voice lends the narrator a clear upper hand over the film's images, as we shall see.

*Be... true* (Ajadrawdee Wongsakon, 2004) has a classical first-person narration: Max, the young protagonist, tells us of the twists and turns of fate that led him to finally find his true love. His narration is ironic and playful at times, and thus rather atypical for the genre of romance. For instance, he promises to tell us the story of how he met his girlfriend. We see images of a beautiful young woman smiling at him, until Max suddenly realizes that he has made a mistake while narrating: This is not the woman he meant, but an ex-girlfriend who left him for a rich Westerner, causing him much heartache.

Throughout the film, Max continues to narrate. As he does so, he often becomes ironic or digresses into imaginary scenarios and fantasies. For example, he pictures himself getting married to the transsexual in his office who keeps making passes at him. Later on, he imagines the two of them as an elderly couple, watching TV on the sofa together.



Max' imagined life with his transsexual coworker in *Be... true*

Both visions are, for Max, absurd worst-case scenarios that stand in sharp contrast to the happiness he hopes to find with his beloved. His position as narrator is strong and highly present, and the images follow his voice, depicting the flights of his imagination and cutting them off again when he realizes that it is time to return to the actual events of the story.

Yet a step further in the authorization of narrators is commentary on the act of narration itself. Some narrators, like Max, make references to the story they tell as a work of fiction. They seem to realize that they are characters in a work of fiction and to be aware of themselves as narrators, of the plot as a fictitious structure, and of the audience's presence. Further, they reflect on this and volunteer their thoughts on the story, such as the old narrator in *Monrak Transistor* commenting on the plot's progression, or Max's musings on alternative endings of the film, or the narrator in *Mah Nakorn* doubting the protagonist's intelligence.

During these commentaries on the act of narration, the narrators frequently address the audience directly – a metafictional gesture that acknowledges the role of the narrator as crucial for the act of storytelling:

One must recognize that the voice-over narrator is always speaking to someone, whether that someone is the theater audience, a dramatized narratee, or just himself, and that his act of telling a story out loud couches the filmic story as a deliberate, conscious communication. (Kozloff 1988, 51)

The narrators' consciousness of their communicating is emphasized by the fact that they often gaze into the camera lens while addressing the audience. This gives the effect of them looking the viewer directly in the eye – a striking departure from the classical mode of cinematic narration, in which one of the basic norms is to treat the camera as invisible to the on-screen characters and to create the illusion of a closed diegetic space. By gazing into the lens, narrators break the so-called fourth wall: the imaginary wall at the front of the stage or film set and the invisible boundary between the fictional setting and its audience. Breaking the fourth wall disrupts the fictional illusion and challenges the audience's suspension of disbelief, the unspoken agreement to accept the action on the set as a fictional world for the duration of the performance. By doing so, narrators take their function to a metalevel, enhancing the fact that every story is mediated, and that it is the narrator who mediates between the worlds of the audience and the fictional world:

... one of the hallmarks of the classic Hollywood style has been to make the narration invisible and promote the illusion that one is watching an unmediated reality. By making the 'voice' more obvious and exploitable, voice-over films highlight the double-layering effect discussed by narrative theorists – the text can now clearly be seen as the interplay between the narrative action, the story, and the process of telling it, the discourse. (Kozloff 1988, 53)

By way of the narrators' mediation, the structure of cinematic illusion becomes transparent. In more extreme cases, narrators even go beyond mediating to seemingly influencing the style of particular sequences. When Pod, the protagonist in *Mah Nakorn*, returns from Bangkok to visit his parents' house in the country, he feels time passes very slowly, compared to the frantic city life. As the narrator tells us this, we see typical scenes of country life – crops growing, the harvest, Pod's family welcoming him back – all unfolding in slow motion. The film's images seem to follow the narrator's interpretation of the protagonist's feelings, emphasizing them with the artificiality that slow motion engenders. It almost seems as if the narrator were mysteriously linked to the alteration of the camera's shutter speed; in any case, he makes us aware of the cinematic

possibilities of subjectivizing perception. Seen in relation to the effects of personalization and naturalization discussed earlier, the effect here is a kind of overpersonalization or hypernaturalization, by having the narrator being so present that he fully determines the film's style.

The style element of emphasizing the narrator's role and conscious, self-aware narration echoes the influence of recent pop culture and its postmodernistic tendency to metafiction. The narrator's gaze into the camera possibly also mocks the television reporting style, equating the filmic narrator with the television reporter and moderator. Emphasized narration is also an important element in local traditions of storytelling, something we will turn to next.

### **The Narrator as Moral Entity: Storytelling Traditions**

Storytelling in Thai culture traditionally has always had a strong moral interest and obligation. This understanding of storytelling is, of course, linked to the basic traditional notion of a story as less an illusional structure created for pure enjoyment than it is the medium of choice for conveying moral truths and lessons. In educational as well as spiritual contexts, stories serve as illustrations and parables. They exist as exemplary case studies of higher orders, of abstract universal systems and laws. Thus, storytellers – traditionally often teachers, monks and elders – are naturally regarded with high respect, as it is their task to convey and represent ethical, moral and spiritual guidelines. Ideally, they have an implicit moral integrity, of which they must always be aware and which they may never abuse, since it is their responsibility to make their stories serve a higher purpose – usually that of setting examples of correct behaviour and its consequences. In traditional oral-based Thai culture, storytellers represent important sources of knowledge and wisdom. Since the roles of these narrators correspond with their status as figures of authority, the act of storytelling reinforces and reproduces social structures: the voice of the narrator becomes the voice of authority and the intermediary between the audience and a higher order.

This notion of a story's meaning and value corresponds to principles found in Thai mainstream genre cinema. As discussed in previous chapters, Thai genre cinema operates along the lines of formulas: clear-cut storylines and archetypal characters follow strict schemata of clearly delineated principles of good and evil, with moral unambiguity being of key importance. While genre cinema is clearly understood as entertainment, its inclination towards an underlying moral structure that conforms to that of society and spirituality is obvious. It is hardly surprising, then, that genre cinema's narrator characters are the central points of the narration, and that they, too, inhabit a position of moral authority from which they guide the audience. However unusually quirky, humorous, and eccentric as these narrators might be, they always remain reliable and trustworthy entities. Cinematic narrators are a modern-day expression of the narrator's role in regional performance traditions. It is their duty to provide guidance and to ensure the fictional structure is understood correctly.

A common feature in Thai cinema is the explicit stating of the story's moral at the end of the film, giving the story a definite closure that is in line with the desire for unambiguity. The end is undoubtedly the end, the final message having been delivered and the purpose of the story thus declared.

The last scene of *Khon liang chang* shows the elephant keeper walking through the wilderness with his family, carrying their few belongings, looking for a new home. A voice-over accompanies the scene, comparing the destruction of the forest to the destruction of the human body: minor damages will heal, but too many injuries can prove fatal. The cries of the elephant that many people claim to hear might in fact be cries of the forest's soul in its fight for survival. The voice-over concludes that there remains hope that humans will understand and respect the value of nature. This voice, remarkably, is not that of the old ranger who has served as narrator during the film until now, but an anonymous, depersonalized voice. The message it delivers is of higher wisdom and ethical urgency, so that it transcends normal narrative communication, becoming a metaphysical truth. In keeping with this, the speaker must also transcend his physical existence: he is anonymous and invisible. The old ranger may be the narrator of the plot, but this separate voice that draws the final conclusion clearly ranks above the ranger in

terms of respect. As a disembodied voice, it becomes a non-human, ultimate moral authority. It is telling that this style of speakers' voice is known in Western documentary film discourse as the «voice of God».

Another formal element sometimes used for this purpose are written inserts and intertitles. They serve as structuring elements, marking the beginning, the ending, and separate episodes; they often also deliver the motto or moral of individual episodes or of the story as a whole. In this way, they accompany and complement the function of the narrating character or the voice-over narrator, and may be regarded as an additional narrating element forming a system together with the spoken narration.

As Sarah Kozloff points out, written inserts can be regarded as a form of narration related to voice-over narration, as a kind of precursor, since intertitles started with the birth of cinema, as an addition by exhibitors and producers who felt the need to pass on to the audience information not conveyed by the silent images (Kozloff 1988, 24). Systems of multiple narration combine several narrating authorities, expressing themselves in different ways, through voice or writing. Generally, they work together in narrating the story, while each of them adapts separate roles: while the narrator character is often tied into the story, written inserts or depersonalized voice-overs take more distance, commenting from outside.

At the end of *Ruang Talok 69* (*Sixty-nine*, Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 1999), Tum, the heroine, heads out of Bangkok in her car for the green countryside. She leaves behind her wrecked apartment filled with gangsters' corpses, a series of unsolved misunderstandings and deaths of innocent people – all caused by a box filled with money delivered to her door by mistake, which she had originally planned to keep. Realizing the never-ending chain of gruesome events this unexpected fortune entails, she changes her mind, dumps the money in a pond and flees. After shots of Tum driving and the verdant countryside zipping past outside the car windows like a kind of redemption, the screen goes black. In white writing, words appear: «When God gives you a present, he gives you a whip»<sup>45</sup>. Here, the writing fulfills a similar role to that of the *acousmètre* in *Khon liang chang*: it

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<sup>45</sup> Here, the term «God» refers not to a monotheistic god in the Christian understanding, but rather to a more universalized notion of a higher being in charge of fate.



delivers the lesson to be learnt from the story, referring to the double face of fate and the importance of differentiating wisely between good and bad luck. Both the written insert and the depersonalized voice-over seem to be messages of a higher moral authority with a didactic aim. These authorities do not have faces, bodies or names, instead, they appear in an abstract form, as voice or writing, thus as pure language. Nothing distracts from the message itself and its status, enhancing its seriousness. Perhaps a human form would be too similar and close to the audience's own form of existence to deliver these final messages.

### **The Narrator as Mediator: Thai Drama and Early Film**

In several ways, Thai drama strongly relies on the role of the narrator to carry the story. Some forms, like the classical masked dance drama *khon*, use the technique of *phak*, of a sole narrator character who is not integrated into the acting and dancing, but relates the plot from an outside view.

Other dramatic forms combine the role of narrator with that of the actor. The popular dramatic form of *likay* has a standardized opening part called *ok khaek*. It consists of the troupe master introducing himself, the troupe and the story to the audience. He presents himself as a fictional character and at the same time establishes himself as the narrator of the story. During the entire play, he will inhabit a sort of double role, repeatedly switching between acting out his character and narrating the events to us, stepping into and then out of the diegesis. By doing this, he not only represents a character, but also mediates the story to us, being our guide throughout the whole fictional structure (Pong 1995, 144).

A similar form of narrating is found in the *Jatakas*, a popular form of Buddhist teachings. Buddhist monks traditionally tell the *Jatakas*, stories of the Buddha's previous human lives, to the audience in poetic and dramatic recitations. While they narrate with the aim of teaching Buddhist values, they often do not remain outside the story, but start to impersonate their characters, lending them different voices, gestures and facial expressions. They thus turn into actor-narrators, often conveying the excitement of the

adventures and romances they tell, while participating at the same time (Mattani 1996, 204).

These forms can be understood as predecessors to the previously mentioned level of metafiction sometimes found in recent Thai cinema.<sup>46</sup> Just as in filmic narration, dramatic narration often takes on a second level and becomes a statement about narration itself. Dramatic illusion, in these forms, has very fluid boundaries; the dividing line between the illusional world and the audience shifts easily, and narrators are figures that mediate between the two and have the ability to transgress the boundaries.

The great importance of narrators in dramatic traditions helps to explain why narrators in Thai film are prominent and often highly visible, with strongly marked traits: Thai audiences are traditionally familiar with having someone relate the story to them and commenting on it as well. It becomes obvious here that dramatic traditions have been carried onward into cinematic narrative form. Hence, perhaps, the freedom Thai cinematic narrators enjoy: narrator characters are accustomed to being a key part of every show, and the show depends on their presence. They are used to the limelight, to being not only heard, but watched as well. Their repertoire encompasses the act of telling as well as showing, by using their voices as well as gestures, mime and their whole body as instruments. Performativity is a significant aspect of narration of Thai drama and film narration.

In the course of local film history, audience reception has become accustomed to various forms of narrators accompanying screenings from an extrafilmic position. Some of these have become unique characteristics of Thai cinema and left their imprint on it for decades.

During the 1930s, production companies distributing silent films faced new competition from the introduction of sound movies. To stay in business, the Patanakhon Film

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<sup>46</sup> Chetana Nagavajara, in a conversation with the author, February 2007.

Company had the intertitles of US silent films translated by interpreters standing next to the screen, as in the Japanese *benshi* tradition.<sup>47</sup>

The arrival of sound films deepened the problem of language barriers. Sin Siboonruang, better known under his stage name Thit Khiew, came up with a solution. Besides working in film distribution, he was a member of a travelling theatre company. From this tradition, he introduced the concept of *phak*, the on-scene narrator from Khon drama mentioned above, to film screenings: a narrator would retell the story and the dialogue in Thai during the screening and comment on it at the same time. This concept was first used for a screening of an Indian film featuring an episode of the *Ramayana*, the origin of the Thai epic *Ramakien*. Since the *Ramakien* is an important and immensely popular subject matter in classical Thai drama and is also told by a *phak* narrator, the screening was a great success, and the use of simultaneous narration was soon widely employed for Thai as well as foreign films, silent and sound films alike (Fouquet 1988, 77). In this way, extrafilmic narration evolved from a pragmatic solution to a popular element of cinematic entertainment.

Another form of extrafilmic narration was live dubbing, a practice widely employed in Thai cinema between the 1950s and 1970s. This is a specifically Thai tradition, taking live narration a step further: local films were shot on silent stock for economic reasons; later, they were dubbed by professional dubbers, during the screening. This practice was also used for the live synchronization of foreign-language films. Usually, a male and a female dubber would speak the dialogue lines of the characters, while another person would speak the narration. This was less expensive than subtitling foreign films; furthermore, it enabled illiterate viewers to understand the dialogue. A remarkable characteristic of live dubbing was that the dubbers sometimes incorporated their own personal note into the film's soundtrack and story, slightly changing or shifting meaning. For instance, local jokes, gossip or allusions would be added into the dialogue as an extra

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<sup>47</sup> Fouquet 1988, 76. It is highly probable that Patanakhon was directly inspired by the *benshis*, e.g. by company workers' travel to Japan or by Japanese visiting Thailand, as exchange between the two countries was well established at the time.

treat for the audience, referring to their everyday world and constructing a connection between the world of the film and that of the viewers. In this way, the screening became more than just entertainment – it also reflected and commented on the world the audience lived in. The dubbers became co-narrators of the film, contributing their own part to the fictional world from outside of it.

Seen against this historical background, the role of narrators as mediators between fiction and the audience becomes evident, as does their affinity to narration that includes a fictional metalevel. By exposure to the understanding of narration inherent in these dramatic traditions and historic practices, local audiences have, over time, developed a familiarity with highly present, personalized and morally conscious narrators, as well as a taste for additional, extrafilmic and self-reflective narration, as an important part of an entertaining performance. In fact, certain highly personalized, strongly subjective narrators in recent cinema might even be seen as positions that integrate the element of commentary liberated from the story, an element originally delivered by positions of extrafilmic narration.

In summary, the way that drama and storytelling traditions have been adapted to the more recent medium of cinema creates a strong continuity in local narrating style, as well as in the mode of audience reception and viewing habits. As key factors, personalization and naturalization continue to form filmic narration; as such, they transfer narrative structures shaped by oral tradition into recent mainstream and semi-independent cinema, familiarizing it with older local cultural practices. Their focal point seems to lie in the principle of communality. This is also formative for cinematic narration, especially in its appearance as voice-over, since, as Sarah Kozloff has shown, the voice-over narrator is by definition always speaking to an addressee. The act of storytelling out loud emphasizes the human bonds that lie behind it:

Not only does the voice-over naturalize cinematic narration, it also creates a special relationship with the viewer. The voice-over couches a film as a conscious, deliberate communication – which, in actuality, it is. Thus the narrator implicitly acknowledges the spectator's own existence and personhood; such an acknowledgement is a pleasant form of flattery. Moreover, because the cinematic story is now being consciously, deliberately displayed to the spectator, the spectator is placed less as a voyeur and more as an invited

confidante. Since in many cases the voice-over allows the spectator – and the spectator alone – access to highly personal information, it thus simulates the exchange between the closest of friends or relations (...). Finally, and I think, most crucially, while we sit in darkened theaters, our attention focused on images larger than life, voice-over narration recreates our first experiences of narrative: being told a story, or being read aloud to. Not only does the technique hark back to the childhood of narrative art, it refers back to our own childhoods as well. The voice turns the moviegoing experience into Storytime. (Kozloff 1988, 129)

### 3.5 Performance Inserts

Toward the end of *Monrak Transistor* (Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 2000), the protagonist Paen sits in his prison cell, longing for home and regretting the foolish actions that have led him here. As his gaze becomes wistful, the camera closes in, music starts to play, and Paen starts to sing a Thai folk music classic, Surapon Sombatcharoen's *Mai Leum* (literally: don't forget). Soon, he is joined by other characters of the film, the living and the dead, all coming together to sing along. The scene becomes a sort of mini-review of the plot so far, calling to mind all the events that have happened and all the characters Paen has met.

This scene is easily recognized as a homage to the famous scene in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (USA 1999), in which plot development is temporarily suspended as the characters each take turns in singing bits of a pop song by Aimee Mann.<sup>48</sup> The director of *Monrak Transistor* makes no secret of his admiration for *Magnolia* and openly declares the scene as an homage (Stephens 2003). It is, nevertheless, also typical for contemporary Thai film: recent Thai fiction films frequently feature show scenes – song, dance, theatre, and other performance scenes integrated into the films' diegesis.

The most frequently asked question after this statement usually is whether these scenes are similar to Bollywood song and dance numbers.<sup>49</sup> Hindi mainstream cinema is famous for its performance scenes that are a vital part of the films and their popularity. Their appearance, style and meaning in the films' context is highly standardized, whereas Thai show scenes are much less frequent and also less homogenous.<sup>50</sup> First of all, Thai show scenes do not always consist of song and dance like Bollywood scenes. Some of them use

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<sup>48</sup> The scene I refer to begins at 134 minutes. For an in-depth analysis, see Daniel 2004, 2 and 93-101, who also gives a concise general introduction into singing scenes in fictional film.

<sup>49</sup> This is probably due to the fact that the Western Europeans I discussed this topic with have witnessed a boom in the regional distribution, screening and popularity of Bollywood cinema since circa 2000. Bollywood seems to have become, in Western Europe, a sort of blueprint for the notion of South (and also, it seems, Southeast) Asian use of song and dance in film.

<sup>50</sup> For instance, Bollywood song and dance numbers often are used to integrate traditional or religious rituals and festivities into the plot. Other typical functions are the expression of the characters' dreams, fantasies and desires and the presentation of movie stars. For more detail, see Schneider 2005.

only song, others combine this with dance, while in others, there is no singing, but only dancing or theatre scenes. Unlike the scenes in Bollywood cinema, performance inserts are not regular elements in Thai film, but appear only intermittently. And while Bollywood features mainly Indian or Indian-inspired music and dance, Thai show scenes may consist both of traditional and of modern performances.

There is, of course, the most simple version of show scenes in fiction film: The performance is part of the action – the scene might be, for instance, set in a performance venue such as a cinema or a concert hall, or might focus on characters whose profession it is to perform, giving the camera a chance to linger on the show a little longer than absolutely necessary for the plot's progression. This gives the film an opportunity to offer a little extra entertainment, thrown in between the action and providing a short, amusing break.

For example, a side character in *Ok Baytong* (Nonzee Nimibutr, 2003) works as a nightclub dancer, so the nightclub becomes a recurrent setting for several scenes. The club, being a place of decadent entertainment, stands in contrast to the spiritual background of the film's main character, who has recently left monkhood. Even though this setting is not central to the plot, the camera and soundtrack make the most of it, reveling in the loud music, the bright neon lights and the dancers' fancy, colorful costumes.

*Hom rong* (*The Overture*, Ittisoonthorn Vichailak, 2004) follows the career and life of a musician who plays the *ranad ek*, a Thai xylophone. The backdrop of his biography is the history and development of Thai classical music, which plays a major role. Large parts of the film are, of course, devoted to scenes showing musicians performing, some of them filmed elaborately and for the length of whole pieces of music.

Such performance inserts are common. They appear throughout film history and in various film cultures, making use of the unique possibility the medium offers to capture visual spectacle.

### **Performance Inserts as Magic Moments**

The show inserts I focus on here are complicated by the fact that they are usually unrealistic. This means that it is highly improbable that people would sing, dance or otherwise perform in comparable real-life situations, which makes these scenes highly artificial, a kind of magic moment clearly marked as eschewing realism. The artificiality is often emphasized by the behaviour of the performers and the style the performance is filmed in. The inserts are moments when the film's established fictional world, the so-called diegesis, is momentarily interrupted. In addition, the artificiality of the insert signals a clear break with the diegesis: what we get to see in the insert is a special part of the story. It is slightly apart from it and has an exceptional status as not being totally in line with the rest. The resulting effect on the viewers is a short moment of astonishment, slight confusion, perhaps even mild irritation. The inserts work like a magic trick: the story hides behind the show insert for the blink of an eye and reappears later.

In relation to the rest of the relevant film, the performance scenes are clearly set apart, appearing as unrealistic, magic moments with distinct beginnings and endings. The magic effect is partially caused by the combination of nondiegetic music with a diegetic singing voice: music from an unknown source accompanies the performing characters, as if the film as a narrative system would support the eccentric behaviour of the performers, cooperating in the unreal dimension of the moment.

Let us return to the scene from *Monrak Transistor* mentioned at the beginning of the chapter to examine in detail what makes it unrealistic and sets it apart from the rest of the film. As the camera zooms in on Paen's face and he begins to sing, music accompanies him from the background. It is *lookthoong*, Thai folk music, featuring traditional string instruments. Its source, however, is not visible on screen, and it is practically impossible that it would be anywhere nearby, because Paen is in a prison cell. The music seems to soar up from out of nowhere, accentuating Paen's song and its emotional content. After the first few lines, the film cuts from the close-up to a shot of Paen sitting behind his wife lying on their bed. Now, he sings to her, but she seems not to notice him, sadly gazing into the distance instead. Through the lyrics of the song, he promises to cherish and never to forget the moments they shared. She shows no reaction. Paen appears as himself in the



past, dressed in clothes he wore earlier in the story, making us guess his visit is only imagined. He sees himself as he appeared in the past, symbolizing happier times, as well as the way his wife remembers him, before they lost touch with one other because of Paen's misdeeds and misfortune.

Minor characters from the film act as the background chorus. They are strangely out of place in this setting. Some of them appeared much earlier in the plot and are no longer present in the current situation; their appearance is like one of ghosts from the past, especially since one of them has already died in the plot. Yet they sing, facing the camera, as if addressing the viewer directly. This gives the sequence an absurd humour and at the same time adds to its nostalgic feel by evoking the past and the ephemerality of life and happiness. These emotions match the melancholy mood of the song, the music and lyrics of which help to set the atmosphere and express Paen's longing for home. There has been singing at earlier parts of the film, but in realistic situations, on stage or at parties. Here, the unrealistic aspect of singing an elaborate song accompanied by an orchestra in a prison cell is heightened further by the imaginary singing with a troupe of ghostly background singers, to someone who is far away and cannot possibly see or hear the singer.

It is not only the surreal, dreamlike quality of the sequence that sets it apart from the rest of the film – in addition, it is a formally closed unit: The music begins and ends with Paen's song, and a frame is set by the close-up of Paen's face at the start and the closing of the sequence. As a narrative element, this unit conveys to us Paen's feelings and regrets, serving as introspection. Through its grim humour and its unrealistic, almost fantastic atmosphere, it also displays how tragic Paen's fate is and that it is his own fault: The emotionality of his performance is touching, yet it is exactly the desire to sing that has gotten him into trouble in the first place. The beauty of his art seems at once dangerous and seductive. The sequence tells us all this in a very compact, lyrically condensed way.

*Fan chan (My Girl*, Komgrit Threewimol, Songyos Sugmakanan, Nithiwat Tharatorn, Vijja Kojew, Vithaya Thongyuyong, Adisorn Tresirikasem, 2003) tells the story of a childhood friendship between a boy and a girl. Many scenes of the movie show the kids

playing games. In one of them, a group of boys re-enacts kung fu stunts as seen in Chinese martial arts soap operas (00:29:55). This TV genre was very popular and widely broadcast in Thailand in the 1980s, when *Fan chan* takes place, and has a characteristic film style of its own, with elements such as archaic costumes, sudden fast zoom-ins or the alternation of whirlwind action and held poses, including the gaze into the camera lens. Typical auditive elements include «whoosh» sounds and the artificial-sounding weapon clashes during fights. The play sequence is filmed in exactly this style, with the boys dressed in Chinese period costumes complete with matching hairstyles, beards and weapons, and the camera zooming in on their faces.



Boys reenacting a kung-fu movie in *Fan chan*

They perform stunts which hint at the use of wire, a common technique used in classic martial arts films that has an effect of high artificiality, because it allows actors to jump and soar through the air with unnatural length and height. It is also, seen from the present day, a nostalgic style element from a martial arts era before CGI stunts. As such, it corresponds to the overall nostalgia for 1980s childhood experiences that are the essence of *Fan chan*.

This is not simply a scene showing boys at play, but boys performing a 1980s martial arts movie scene. As such, it is also a comment on the audience reception of 1980s Thai popular television culture. The camera and soundtrack seem to join in with the make-believe. A theme song with Cantonese lyrics suddenly plays, and the costumes appear from out of nowhere. It would, of course, be possible that the boys had organized such elaborate costumes to play in; however, considering the average activities of eight-year-old boys, this seems rather improbable. The filmic elements become allies of the boys in

their game: they help with the make-believe. This is made clear again at the end of this sequence, where the boys appear right after play, this time with crude homemade cardboard weapons and a plastic sword, wearing old pieces of cloth as costumes.

*Mah Nakorn* (*Citizen Dog*, Wisit Sasanatieng, 2005) begins with the protagonist, a young man called Pod, leaving his parents' house in the country for Bangkok. As the titles appear over shots of the Bangkok skyline, a Thai pop song starts to play. After images of busy streets, flyovers and lots of concrete, Pod speeds by on the back seat of a motorcycle taxi. In passing the camera, the driver looks into it and mouths the lyrics of the song; he becomes the singer. The following shots show passersby singing along, all joining in. As the song is an a cappella performance, consisting of human voices without instrumental accompaniment, there is need for many voices: besides the main singer, there are the chorus and several short solo parts, acted out by a young flower vendor, a street cleaner, a policeman, a homeless person, and commuters on public transport. All of them sing looking at the camera lens, filmed frontally, which gives the intro sequence the recurrent image structure of a portrait series. In keeping with one of the film's concerns, the contrast between humble life and the achievement of success, the intro sequence focuses on ordinary people, some of them with low-status jobs. The lyrics speak of the value of *meta*, the Buddhist ethic of compassion brought by love, saving the singers from desperation and emptiness.





Bangkok citizens singing in the opening sequence of *Mah Nakorn*

The unrealistic singing performances of these people in their everyday surroundings are tinged with irony: the bus arrives just in time after the chorus of commuters has finished the verse, so they all hurry to get aboard, abandoning the bus stop that has served as backdrop. On the bus, individuals singing short solos act as if performing on stage, belting into imaginary microphones. This creates an absurd effect, contrasting as it does with the earnest lyrics on human values. These lyrics, for their part, contrast with the poor people the sequence focuses on, who are not typical representatives of happiness, but rather of hardship and the struggle of existence.

The sequence is a closed unit, framed by the song and structured by the repeated image composition. Its function is to deliver the title sequence and the title theme as an intro to the plot. It also sets the mood for the rest of the film, easing the audience into it: the combination of the absurd with reflections on social issues and the value of compassion will stay in the foreground of the entire movie.

As the types of performance differ, so does the situation of the scenes in the plot contexts and their narrative qualities and functions. While some scenes convey a certain amount of information necessary for the continuation of the plot, others seem to exist mainly for the

display of a show. In general, it can be said that the performance scenes are for the most part of reduced narrative functionality. In this way, they are narrative hybrids: they narrate and entertain at the same time.

### **Characteristics: Performance Scenes as Effect**

The common factors and the essence of the performance inserts is not so much in their narrative functionality as in their effect. For one thing, they set a mood and create an atmosphere. This may underscore the special mood of a certain moment in the story or of the whole film. In both cases, the films use the sensuality of music, singing or bodily expression to create extra emotion. For this reason, the mood could hardly be created to the same effect by using dialogue scenes.

Another characteristic of the scenes is the use of humour. They almost always mix the emotionality of the performance with something to laugh about. Usually, this sense of humour tends towards the absurd and surreal because of the strange, unexpected circumstances under which the performance takes place. The magic moment is, thus, related to the absurd through its sense of unreality.

The way the actors are set in scene also differs from the rest of the film: Their appearance and physical posture is very clearly directed towards the audience. The performance is on clear display, it is intended for show and hardly as singing, dancing or similar for one's own pleasure. This gives the sequences a kind of stage effect.

The most extreme expression of this direction towards the audience is the gaze of the performers into the camera lens, breaking the so-called fourth wall – the virtual wall dividing the stage space from the audience space. This gives the effect that they are looking us directly in the eye, acknowledging our presence and our looking at them, and returning our gaze – similarly to the effect of narrators looking into the camera lens and directly addressing the audience, as described in the previous chapter. Looking into the lens is usually treated as taboo by classical cinema, where the camera is supposed to create the impression of its own invisibility. The breaking of this taboo creates a strong

effect of unveiling the presence of the camera, making the performance even more unrealistic through its atypical gaze structure.

The performance sequences are thus a kind of playful bonus track. As independent, autonomous units, they are connected to, but distinct from, the rest of the plot. They lay a strong emphasis on the act of performing, of displaying, of offering visual spectacle.

### **Performance Inserts and Self-Reference: A Break with Classical Hollywood Style**

Classical Hollywood film style takes transparent narration as its ideal. The camera and the editing are supposed to be fluid and smooth, calling no attention to themselves, but concentrating instead on the action and enabling perfect filmic illusion in which the fictional world can unfold without disturbance. The diegesis is presented as a fixed, unquestioned entity. There exists an unspoken pact between the audience and the narrator: the presented diegesis is supposed to be believable and believed, and the audience suspends its disbelief in return for entertainment. To achieve and preserve this state of belief, the production of the diegesis must not be made transparent. Viewers focus on the diegesis, the fictional illusion, not on the way it is made. The film, for its part, does its utmost to obscure its nature as an artefact.

Show scenes can confuse this setup. By emphasizing the production of illusion, they create a peephole in the diegesis, through which the viewers catch a glimpse of the source of the illusionary world they are enjoying. These are self-references and take the film to a metalevel, breaking fictional illusion (Lewinsky 1996 and Daniel 2004, 99). While doing so, they do not seem to mind dropping out of the diegesis, but in fact play with this effect. Performance inserts are thus a playful trick, sometimes ironic, sometimes poetic.

The most direct way this happens is through the gaze of the performing characters into the lens. By returning our gaze and breaking a taboo, they seem to tell us they know about the strange, illusionary world in which they exist, and realize that a camera and microphones are directed towards them. They know they are fictional characters and emphasize their fictionality by something even more artificial: performing something extra. By doing this, they mirror the very essence of cinema: the presentation of audiovisual spectacle by way of the cinematic apparatus.

The self-referential effect can be understood as a symptom of a specific attitude in filmmaking: it lets the audience members know that they are a crucial part of the film. It acknowledges the existence of the audience as well as its existential meaning for the story. For this reason, it trusts in the audience's viewing pleasure and competence and engages in a close relationship with it (Lewinsky 1996) – symbolized through the gaze that becomes reciprocal.

### **Performance Inserts in Nonfiction Film**

It should be noted that performance inserts appear in nonfiction film as well. *Sawan sud uam* (*Happy Berry*, Thunska Pansittivorakul, 2004) is an independent documentary that focuses on a group of young people living in Bangkok. Together, they run the trendy clothes store «Happy Berry» located on Siam Square, a hip shopping area popular with teenagers and students. They also perform in a pop band. The film shows scenes of their life – working in the shop, talking to customers, hanging out at home and having parties in the tiny apartment they share. The camera catches them indulging in drugs, kinky sex, hip-hop, fashion, exhibitionism and narcissism. These uninhibited lifestyles seem to break down barriers in a traditional and religious society, but the film questions whether this rebellious attitude is superficial, and maturity will bring the kids a more sedate way of life. The film style suggests a strong influence by *cinéma vérité*, and the combinations of this style with the subject matter – alternative urban youth subculture – may call to mind Andy Warhol's Factory films.

Toward the end of the film, the audience is in for a surprise: The grainy, gritty, low-key documentary images suddenly give way to a pop video clip featuring the youths' band performing a song called *Happy Berry*. The slick, shiny style of the clip strongly contrasts with the rest of the film. The appearance of the kids changes too: they adapt a squeaky-clean, smiling appearance and strike iconic poses as they sing and dance. They perform for the camera, directed toward the lens and looking at it. Whereas they must have been conscious of being filmed during the entire shooting of the documentary, their relationship with the camera radically shifts in this sequence: they acknowledge its



presence and flirt with it, probing their effect on the audience, as if they were standing on a stage facing the viewers and trying to win their approval.

It is not only the style of the performance, but also that of the film that marks an orientation toward the audience. The static camera watches from an audience perspective. Vibrant, clear colors and computer graphics follow the style of advertising and mainstream East and Southeast Asian pop videos. The clip obviously aims to please, unlike the rest of the documentary, which aims for authenticity.

An even more striking example of a show insert in a docudrama is found in *Tongpan* (Euthana Mukdasanit and Surachai Jantimaton, 1977), a fictional film based on the real-life experiences of a farmer in Isarn, a poverty-stricken region in northeastern Thailand. *Tongpan* is a medium-length independent film that was banned by the government because of its socialist message and the suspected communist sympathies of the filmmakers, a group of students involved in the 1973 democracy movement. Its realist style stands in stark contrast to classical, escapist Thai genre cinema.

Tongpan and his family are forced to give up their farm because a dam built nearby causes floods on their land during the Monsoon and drought during the dry season. They move to Chiang Khan, a small town near the border with Laos, where Tongpan takes odd jobs to support his family: he works as a rickshaw driver, a Muay Thai boxer and a chicken watchman. The conditions are harsh, and the struggle to survive becomes almost unbearable and soon takes its toll on the family's health. Asked to represent the farmers in a seminar on the construction of an even bigger dam, Tongpan is so overwhelmed by his problems that he leaves the seminar speechless.

Although fictional, the film closely resembles a documentary in appearance, an effect evoked by grainy black and white images on 16mm stock and a direct-cinema-style handheld camera. Its high degree of realism and its feel of authenticity are results of the close relationship the filmmakers built with the lay actors, staying in their villages for an extended period of time and experiencing their way of life. Social and environmental concern motivated the filmmakers to depict the villagers' problems as truthfully as



possible. The actor who portrays Tongpan, Ong-art Ponethon, was a farmer and former Muay Thai boxer.<sup>51</sup>

After about two thirds of the film (0:38:00), Tongpan's story is interrupted by a performance scene. A man dances, while two musicians play traditional local instruments and sing a song that laments the hardship of life, the scarcity of nature and the deep roots connecting them with their homeland. The camera creates graphic pictures of high contrast, framing the artists in extreme close-ups or as distant silhouettes before a vast landscape, or even boldly combining the two extremes in one image. This striking visual style breaks with the more modest framing of the preceding images. The camera catches the action from a remarkably low angle.



Song and dance scene in *Tongpan*

This scene is clearly of dramatic and aesthetic rather than of ethnologic interest for the film's structure. It is obviously set in scene for the camera; its meaning is a performance for the film audience, not a documentary depiction of villagers making music. The artists

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<sup>51</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tongpan>

are characters we have not encountered so far. There is no plot continuity, but rather a clear break: Tongpan and his problems are temporarily suspended without any indices of a solution or further development. What is more, there is no audience shown in the images, as a documentary camera would surely reveal, and it seems highly improbable that village musicians would perform without an audience. The audience's presence is thus substituted by that of the camera. After a few minutes, the song ends, and the film returns to Tongpan and his family.

Why do these two films with a documentary aim and style feature show inserts?

In *Sawan sud uam*, the use of the show insert is logical, as it is the youths' goal to make it big in pop music, and band work is part of their everyday lives. What is astonishing is not the use of the clip, but the way it is directly cut to without any form of previous announcement, directly following the earlier images, creating the effect that the documentary camera had abruptly switched places with an MTV camera. The film's diegesis changes suddenly to a very different realm, inhabited by the same protagonists, but marked by a strongly differing style and behaviour of the characters. In this way, the film comments on the clean style of contemporary showbiz television.

*Tongpan* refers to a folkloristic element – the music, singing and dancing style and the instruments are parts of local culture, contributing to the sense of authenticity the film wishes to display. The song text serves as an indirect narrative addition, summarizing Tongpan's experiences and feelings. By involving other persons – the artists – the sequence expands the relevance of these feelings from those of an individual to the generalized farmer population of the Northeast, giving it a cultural expression in the film. It underscores the difficulty of the situation by generalizing Tongpan's fate in an artistic form. It also lends an indirect form of expression to the farmers' desperation and anger (Peagam 2006). In the Thai understanding, indirect expressions of emotion and personal issues are considered much better etiquette than direct ones. Apart from these functions, this performance scene is neither ethnographic nor directly narrative. To some extent, its

meaning lies in its entertainment value as a musical insert providing a short break from the plot.

The point of both scenes is that the show inserts bring with them a change in the status of the camera. It is no longer a camera that observes in a documentary mode, but one that captures a performance for the sake of entertainment, for the visual spectacle and the entertainment the scene has to offer.

Compared to show inserts in fiction film, the ones in films with an appeal of documentary truthfulness and authenticity reveal the artificiality of the diegesis to an even higher degree. It seems there is, from the filmmakers' point of view, no contradiction in the combination of a quest for truthfulness and a display of artificiality. The reason probably lies in the attitude that artificial show inserts emphasize even more strongly the essence of the films' statements, using an additional means of expression: an artistic, entertaining one.

### **Possible Explanations**

What are the possible reasons for the popularity of performance inserts in film?

For one, people simply tend to sing out loud more in Thai everyday life than, say, in Central and Western Europe, where singing is often met with more embarrassment, especially in front of others. While people singing out loud to themselves in public spaces are regarded as somewhat eccentric in the latter countries, they seem to draw little attention in Thailand or other parts of Southeast Asia. While this explains an important aspect of the common popularity of performance scenes, their roots likely lie deeper.

Music performances have always played an important role in Thai theatre. Both *lakhon*, the classical dance drama, and *likay*, the popular folk drama, use an alternation of song, dance and spoken dialogue, combining different forms of artistic expression into a «multi-media» performance (Chetana 2004, 227). As a Western influence, purely spoken drama has been received, but never really acclimatized in Thailand. Its impact has remained marginal until the present day. Western music drama, such as the stage musical,

is more popular, being much more in line with Thai aesthetics and audience taste.<sup>52</sup> It corresponds to the Thai dramatic tradition of combining music and spoken drama. Music, song and dance have their own reserved space in every dramatic form, as has a strong trait of audience orientation: actors frequently face the audience, addressing it directly, sometimes even asking its requests for, or opinion of, the play (Chetana 1996(1) and 1996(2)). The stage effect mentioned above is emphasized in this way. This aesthetic tradition has carried on into film style.

Another aesthetic tradition that has influenced film style is the loose structure of Thai drama. In keeping with the multi-level style of performing, dramatic forms have an open structure: they consist of loosely connected sequences that are alterable and not yet in their final form (Chetana 1996(2)). Film seems to have taken over this structural principle – therefore, it is only natural for film to feature performance inserts as yet another episode in the whole of the structure.

The combination of film and music performances has a long history in Thai cinema. It was customary for film stars to sing their favourite theme songs on stage during intermissions. This became a tradition in the 1920s, accompanying screenings until the early 1950s, and was still practiced as late as the 1980s at gala premieres. Dance shows were also popular during intermissions (Mattani 1983, 188). It may well be that this strong link between cinema screenings and stage performances goes back to the entertainment offered at traditional temple and village fairs, where different forms of drama and performance could be enjoyed, sometimes even simultaneously (Fouquet 1988, 45). A typical combination would for instance be *likay* shows alternating with traditional dances, puppet theatre or music; with the advent of the cinema, there would sometimes also be a film screening nearby. The audience would usually attend several of these performances or switch between them, combining them according to their own taste. The multi-level nature of performances can be found not only in the individual

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<sup>52</sup> Chetana 2004. He adds that there is no need for any Thai critic to polemicize on behalf of Shakespeare against Racine as the French writer Stendhal did, «for we know from the outset that Racine has no chance whatsoever.» (227)

dramatic forms, but also in the way these forms were presented to the public. Several performances were presented simultaneously. Furthermore, the structure of these performances usually was organized according to the basic principle of savors, as outlined in the chapter on genre. Each scene is governed by a distinct atmosphere and can be enjoyed for the sake of this by itself, without the necessity of its being understood as a part of the larger play.

The use of performance inserts appears in various film traditions that have been received in Thailand. The Hollywood musical was one of the main genres shown in Thailand from the 1930s onwards; besides the western, it was among the most popular and influential foreign genres at the time, probably owing to the local audience's preference for song and dance (Chetana 1996(1), 243). The earliest Thai sound film, *Long thang* (*Gone Astray*, Wichit Matra, 1932) was a musical, and the musical has remained a popular mode ever since (Fouquet 1988, 153).

The musical romance became one of the postwar local mainstream's favourite genres, peaking in popularity with hit films like *Monrak Lookthung* (*Magical Love in the Countryside* or *Wonder of Luk Thung*, Rungsri Tassanapuk, 1970). The musical was a strong influence in drama as well: during the 1980s, Thailand saw a boom in stage musicals, especially large foreign English-language productions.

Another cinematic tradition featuring a taste for musical performances was that of the Indian films received in Thailand during the 1960s and 1970s (Fouquet 1988, 165). Song and dance numbers are focal points in Indian film, in particular Bollywood movies. They convey the strong emotions of heightened moments in the plot: love, joy, desire, sadness, and so forth. The stylization of these song and dance numbers transport the intensity of these emotions, turning them into magic moments that are the highlights of the film's plots – all the more since they allow the indirect, formalized expression of emotions, the direct display of which might otherwise be deemed too personal and therefore inappropriate.

An immensely popular genre throughout Thai film history is that of Chinese martial arts movies and, from the 1950s on, martial arts television series. In part owing to Thailand's large ethnic Chinese population, this genre has always enjoyed a loyal fan base in Thailand. The performance inserts of Chinese martial arts movies consists of fight scenes, as carefully choreographed as acrobatic dance performances, and often including stunts and accompanying music. They are highly aestheticized, and since they usually are period-set, their costume and set design is elaborate. Another influence might be the Chinese Opera with its highly stylized aesthetics, which has enjoyed a long presence in Thailand due to the large Chinese diaspora.

A popular kind of modern-day Southeast Asian synchronous entertainment are video clips and karaoke videos – synchronous, because omnipresent and often shown as accompaniment to other activities, for example in bars, restaurants, and sometimes on public transport like long-distance buses. The video and karaoke clip industry is strong in Thailand, as local pop music is highly popular. Because of language, the neighbouring country of Laos provides a second market for the industry. The typical style of performance shown on video clips – singing for an audience in stage style – is part of an everyday iconography and therefore very common, as is the notion of performing as an act. Music clips, which were introduced to the Southeast Asian region through US pop culture in the 1980s, have found great resonance since, likely as a result of the regional popularity of traditional song and dance numbers.

Unsurprisingly, some performance sequences strongly resemble video clips. In *Be... true* (Ajadrawdee Wongsakon, 2004), the main character Max is about to call a woman he likes to ask her out to dinner, when his friends offer him advice on making a good impression on women. This is shown as an insert that looks like a video clip, with the protagonists speaking into the camera, background music, computer-animated effects and fast editing. The result is a mini-sequence, an independent unit marked by a special style that appears faster and more absurd than the surrounding scenes.



Cliplike insert in *Be... true*

Similarly, *Mah Nakorn* features a cliplike insert on the subject of reincarnation that shows Pod's grandmother being reborn as a *jing-jok*, a small gecko, and completing

another cycle of life. This scene, too, has lots of animation, music, fast editing and absurd humour, and its pace follows a faster rhythm than the rest of the film.

While the style of this scene might seem to clash at first glance with the spiritual subject of reincarnation, its liveliness and comical tone is in line with the entertainment value of popular Buddhist teachings, as in the performed tales of the Jataka mentioned earlier.

Buddhism in its popular narrative form often integrates humorous elements to transport its teachings.

The appearance of performance inserts can be seen as an echoing of a recent trend in Hollywood mainstream and television series since the mid-1990s: performance inserts as magic moments appear not only in musicals, but in all kinds of genres, disrupting the diegesis in the way previously mentioned. Examples for this dramatic element are *Magnolia*, and its famous sequence to which *Monrak Transistor* refers, as described in the first analysis of this chapter, or the HBO-produced television series *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), in which the characters' dreams, nightmares and visions suddenly materialize, without being formally set apart from the level of their «real» world. While the reasons for this tendency cannot be discussed in detail here, its correspondence with Thai performance inserts is obvious. Although the parallels are evident, it would be simplistic to understand the Thai tendency performance inserts as a mere emulation of the Hollywood trend, since, as we have seen, a preference for song and dance numbers has shaped local performing culture for centuries and has also been received via the cinemas of other foreign cultures, namely India and China.

Performance inserts appear as a recurring element over time, and they pervade multiple local, regional and transnational influences. Local culture has adapted and assimilated the foreign according to its own taste and preferences: at the core of this preference lies the principle of performativity that plays a key role in local storytelling culture.



#### **4. Reperforming Thainess: Representation and Concepts of Realism**

In the preceding chapters, we have studied several recurring characteristics of narration in recent Thai film. The following chapter will now summarize and contextualize them against the background of performativity, a key concept of local culture. In addition, this chapter will examine how film form is shaped by the official ideology of Thainess and by traditional drama aesthetics. The chapter further inquires into the background of local concepts of realism and representation and their reference to pre-modern forms of narration, storytelling and entertainment, as well as into tensions that arise when these concepts are confronted with Western notions of realism and modernity.<sup>53</sup>

The chapter ends with an enquiry into alternative cinematic forms of dealing with the representation of Thainess.

##### **4.1 Performativity as Narrative Tradition**

The previous chapter on performance inserts leads us to a closer examination of performativity, an essential, long-held cultural practice of the region that reappears in its cinematic expression, where it shapes the appearance of local cinema and its understanding of storytelling (Harrison 2007, 206).

I use the term performativity here to signify a special quality of certain cultural expressions, namely the fact that the essence of these cultural expressions lies in a highly staged performance of dramatic, ritual or other acts, and that, through this performance, they materially embody meaning. In this way, they constitute a reality perceived by the community that performs them. Furthermore, they are self-referential: since meaning is created through the performance itself, it and its own construction can be perceived simultaneously.

Performativity is strongly present in regional culture, and its appearance expands beyond the borders of the Thai state. Its significance originates from several factors, some of

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<sup>53</sup> For a brief discussion of the terms «modern» and «modernity», see chapter 3, page 11.

which are the regional popularity of performing arts, orality, and the traditional ritualization of everyday life.

In his study of the official Thai representation of political power and its control of imagery, Peter Jackson traces the role of performativity in Thai culture since the 1960s and proclaims it as central and formative, speaking of a Thai regime of images: « [...] the distinctiveness of Thai power lies in an intense concern to monitor and police surface effects, images, public behaviours, and representations combined with a relative disinterest in controlling the private domain of life» (Jackson 2004(1), 181). The conformity of public images and appearances with state ideology is imperative. Jackson refers back to Rosalind Morris, who argues that in present-day Thailand, political power does not require an essential Thai personhood or a national subjectivity, but rather «the appearance or the performance of ideally nationalist behavior. It requires that one conform oneself to the ideals of the national, and it makes performance the criterion of proper citizenship» (Morris 2000, 147). While performativity is especially linked to the official representation of state power, in general, many-sided performative effects are manifest at various levels of Thai society, which cultivates surface aesthetics, presentations, and appearances, rather than essentialism, and lays a strong emphasis on formality and conformity.

The importance of surface appearances shapes the cultural notion of how knowledge and validity manifest themselves:

In the modern West the simple accumulation of prestigious meanings around a representation is not sufficient to establish its validity. To demonstrate the validity of a representation one needs to establish a link to a principle of veracity. In classical Western epistemologies the philosophical task is to relate representations to extra-discursive «reality» by deploying a notion of truth value in order to distinguish valid statements from the invalid. In Western thought, historically guided by an intellectual ethic of truth above all, the prestige value of a statement depends on its truth value: untrue statements are denied status and only true statements have intellectual prestige. However, in the domain of public discourse under the Thai regime of images, the prestige value of an image may be independent of its truth value. The public image may be invalid with respect to a criterion of truth, yet still retain significant prestige value. This is because the function of discourse within the episteme of images is to establish and enhance the prestige value of representations through processes of symbolic addition and association (Jackson 2004(1), 205).

In the Thai episteme of surfaces, appearances are a truth in themselves and thus autonomous from underlying differing truths (Jackson 2004(1), 189, citing Morris). The surface is, itself, essential. In contrast to the model of modern Western subjectivities, for whom liberation lies in a discourse of truth about itself, Jackson postulates a performative identity as the pattern of modern Thai subjectivity. In doing so, he refers to Judith Butler and her argument that performativity, paired with the repetition of culturally sanctioned ways of acting, shapes and reconfirms patterns of behaviour as supposedly natural or essential parts of one's identity.

The discussion of performativity as a key formative concept for Thai identity helps explain two recurring issues in Thai culture, namely ritualization and image control: Repetition of activities and ritualized behaviour are necessary to sustain the continuous illusion of essential identity: representations need to be reconfirmed in order to inhabit a continuous presence in the collective imagination. Since the «regime of images» favours the surface over the essence, or rather, understands the surface itself to be the essence, it is greatly concerned with keeping surfaces intact and with preventing challenges to the prestige value of representation – hence the rigidity of the Thai censorship system, as mentioned previously, and its severe treatment of negative references to the state and, especially, the monarchy.

Performativity is closely linked with orality, another fundamental cultural practice that is still residual in the region today. The very nature of orality depends on performances: Since it is bound to the voice and hence to the body of a speaker, a text in a culture of orality must always be performed so that it can come into existence in the first place. Without the performances of village bards, wandering theater troupes and chanting monks, folk songs, folk drama and Buddhist chants simply could not exist, since they are only transmitted orally, via the voices of the singers and speakers, and in the present moment of the performance. They cannot be reproduced in any disembodied form, unlike the texts of written culture. The physical and the bodily are key elements of performativity and orality.

Performances also play an important role as cultural memory: in order to be preserved, literature and arts need to be performed. In this way only can they be passed on from the present generation of performers to the next.

Performances are also linked with the high degree of ritualization that pervades everyday life. While this is still valid in the present day, it is even more clearly visible in traditional Thai village culture (Suvanna 2004). Conventions and formalization are important and facilitate social interaction, community actions, and the handling of life events in general. These conventions often find their formal expression in rituals or ritualistic contexts incorporating song and dance, such as village or temple festivities, weddings, and coming of age celebrations. Live performances are essential for rituals and enjoy a high status. Whether they are simple invocations or elaborate rites, formalized communicative conventions mediate content by way of performances that feature ritualistic elements, staged events that generate meaning, like that of *wai khru*, the act of paying respect to one's teacher before every *khon* performance.

Furthermore, and simply enough, performativity is a highly familiar concept due to the regional popularity of performing arts, which exist in various forms of drama, song and dance, each with a long historic tradition. Many of these forms feature highly elaborate performances. They are also often self-referential, like *likay* theater that refers to the dramatic illusion it creates via its narrator, and ritualistic, like *likay* plays and dance shows that are staged to thank spirits.

The culture of performativity and surface appearances as described by Jackson shapes societal conventions, which in turn shape society's modes of storytelling. According to Seymour Chatman, a narrative is formed by events that are interconnected by certain principles (such as causality or contingency). For this, the narrative relies on given conventions, which are socially and culturally established. An understanding of the nature of convention is thus fundamental to a theory of narrative. This need not mean the audience will be aware of its knowledge of conventions, however:

Audiences come to recognize and interpret conventions by «naturalizing» them. To naturalize a narrative convention means not only to understand it, but to «forget» its conventional character, to absorb it into the reading-out process, to incorporate it into one's interpretive net, giving to it no more thought than to the manifestational medium, say the English language or the frame of the proscenium stage. (...) What constitutes «reality» or «likelihood» is a strictly cultural phenomenon, though authors of narrative fiction make it «natural». But of course, the «natural» changes from one society to another, and from one era to another in the same society. (...) According to the structuralists, the norm for verisimilitude is established by previous texts – not only actual discourses, but the «texts» of appropriate behaviours in the society at large. Verisimilitude is an effect of corpus or of intertextuality (hence intersubjectivity) (Chatman 1978, 49ff.).

Performativity and the aesthetics of the surface play an important role in Thai film form. They can be found on various levels in the formal characteristics discussed in the previous chapter. The retelling of stories lays a strong emphasis on performativity: since the story itself is well known, it is the variation by individual storytellers and their performances that make a specific version of the story interesting. The retelling, meanwhile, is in itself a performative act, as it repeatedly enacts the known and the familiar and reconfirms current ideology by repetition and ritual. In addition, intertextual references and cultural codes refer to the audience's awareness of stories as retold cultural constructions and of formalistic storytelling principles.

As narrating and acting are frequently combined in one role, the storyteller becomes a performer as well. Since the story material is familiar, the performance itself is relied upon to keep the audience interested. The strong emphasis on the gesture of narration additionally enhances the performativity inherent in the narrator's role, as well as the ritualistic aspect traditionally connected to the act of storytelling and performing. With the narrator acting as moral entity in service to the stories' messages, their performances themselves do not aim to create fictional illusions, but to embody, illustrate and exemplarize abstract messages.

Thai cinema's rigid genre formulas, schematic plotlines, typified characters and high degree of formalization follow given lines and pre-shaped expectations, representing ever new versions of a matrix of story archetypes, to the point of seeming highly artificial and

perhaps repetitive. The formulaic acting style, with characters referring to stereotypes, uses generic, nonindividual expressions. Thus, acting becomes self-referential. The episteme of surfaces and images is especially apparent in the characters' physical appearance that has a strong impact on the audience's notion of subjectivity: external beauty mirrors virtue, just as ugliness reveals a bad character (Mattani 1983, 34). Similarly, costume is not supposed to blend in, but to convey an image and perform a role.

Furthermore, the atmospheres and the emotional structure of classical Thai genres are performative. This is because each genre is comprised of several episodes with distinct savours that can be readily recognized by their prestructured emotional patterns, and which provide the audience with sets of cues representing moods that the audience can instantly assess. Thus, emotions transported through genre structure are staged. Generally speaking, the formalization of genre, plot and characters facilitates repetition and recognition, and thus displays a high level of conformity, transported via the surface appearance of films. Formulaism supports performativity, and vice versa.

Most prominently, performativity appears in the strong self-referentiality of Thai film. Often metafictional and self-presentational, Thai film makes reference to its artifice. This is most obvious in the various performance inserts that refer to the entertainment value and the performative aspect of the film as a fictional structure and of cinema as a media.

In turn, narrative structures, film style and form, as practised by the mainstream, mirror and reproduce the elementary positionings of conventional society structures that shape Thainess as a state-propagated national identity. By reconfirming popular narratives and values, remakes convey conservatism, as does genre cinema by endlessly reproducing formula conventions. By representing archetypes with externalized psychology and standardized behaviour, film characters are clearly and statically positioned in a highly hierarchic societal system that confirms state ideology and patriarchy. The narrators fit into this structure as well, representing a culture of authorities and elders.

As Fredric Jameson points out, artistic choices need to be viewed not as purely aesthetic decisions, but also in the light of the historical practices and norms that shape and, at times, constrain them. Literary theory and interpretation, then, must reflect the specific conditions imposed on the artists as creative subjects, and the contexts that shape artistic representations. Seen in this way, literary (and cinematic) texts are symbolic narratives that project, expose, and sometimes even subvert unresolved ideological issues that form the «political unconscious» of a culture (Jameson 1981, xi and 18ff.). Thus, form not merely reflects, but is itself ideology. In this way, mainstream Thai film form represents and at the same time reiterates Thainess.

The vital role of performativity is reflected in the traditional role and the behaviour of Thai audiences. It shall be examined further in the following chapter.

### **The Audience as Mirror for Performativity**

While performativity has clearly left its mark on the practice of cultural production, it also is visible in the practice of reception: The audience's role in Thai films is extraordinarily active. The high level of familiarity an average Thai audience has with cross-references, cultural codes and intertextual humor (Juree 1977, 165-166) may well have to do with the fact that children are taken to the movies from a very early age and thus grow up with intertextuality as an element of popular entertainment (Juree 1977, 164 and Mattani 1983, 203).

Audience participation in popular Thai entertainment goes back a long way. In the oral storytelling tradition, from which the Thai folk theatre evolved, the audience was even more actively involved, as Chetana Nagavajara describes:

One can easily bring to mind the picture of a rural village, after a day's work in the fields, when villagers come together and indulge in various kinds of entertainment. Storytelling is one of the most popular activities in a community where the oral tradition is still very much alive. A village bard will narrate a tale, using all the performing techniques at his disposal. He usually begins in the normal conversational tone, then switches over to verse recitation, moving on from chanting to singing. If he is literate, he will take his cue from a written version, or even the royal version, of the story, then add his own folk version to

it, which he will improvise as he goes on. He normally impersonates the characters in the story, assigning different voices to the different *dramatis personae*. This technique has been adopted into the dubbing of both Thai and foreign films, and a 'live' film show with instantaneous dubbing, including special effects, is still very much enjoyed by the common people. But the voice alone will not suffice, and the bard will occasionally use gestures and at times will resort to dance. He might at a certain point step out of his role to make a direct comment to the audience. The breaking up of the dramatic illusion goes even further than that; he will say to the audience he is getting tired and would like members of the audience to share certain roles with him. Audience participation is a common feature of such a performance, and, as far as music is concerned, members of the audience who have brought their instruments can join in at any time. The rise of Thai folk theatre can be described in this way (Chetana 1996, 238-239).

This is probably the most direct possible form of audience involvement: the audience, at times, itself becomes the narrator. In this notion of dramatic practice, there remains no clear dividing line between the narrator and the spectator.<sup>54</sup> Their roles are blurred; the narration arises from and lives in the interplay between both positions. This is a direct expression of the importance of conviviality in Thai entertainment: a big part of the fun lies in the communal experience of performances. While the folk drama form of *likay* has a more formalized dramatic and narrative structure, viewers are still directly addressed. It is also common that they interrupt the show to compliment the artists, make requests, and so on. Direct address of the audience is also found in the highly evolved and very formal art of *khon*, the classical Thai masked dance-drama (Chetana 1996, 239).

In cinema, direct audience participation and interaction is of course not possible as readily as in a stage performance, since the film is already in its final form. Nevertheless, elements that reach back to the interactive tradition of folk theater can be found in recent Thai film. Direct address of the viewer by characters or the narrator sometimes occurs via their gaze into the camera lens, with the effect described earlier, in the chapter on performance inserts. In the fixed narration, a position is deliberately left open for the viewers. Their direct participation is counted on and sometimes directly proposed by the films' narration, most strikingly in the moments of «eye contact» between the character and the viewer, which acknowledge the viewers' physical presence in front of the movie

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<sup>54</sup> See Chetana 1996, 98, who makes a cross-cultural comparison between this theatrical experience and the German writer Bertolt Brecht's theory of the «Lehrstück», which is based on the concept of breaking up the consistency of actor and audience roles.



screen. The viewer – or, in the term Seymour Chatman finds for the position formed as a counterpart to the narrator, the «narratee» – performs just as substantial a narrative task as the narrator: «Recalling that rhetoric in fiction has to do with verisimilitude rather than arguable ‘truth’, the acquiescing narratee can show that the narrator’s efforts to convince, to win acceptance of his version are in fact successful» (Chatman 1978, 258). The role of the narratee lies in the confirmation of the narrator and the believability of the fictional world he creates. In this sense, the narratee defines the narrator in his role, mirroring performativity.

### **Shared Narration in *Dokfa nai meu marn***

Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s first feature-length film *Dokfa nai meu marn* (*Mysterious Object at Noon*, 2000) is at once a study and a prime example of the way performativity in Thai storytelling works. It begins with a title featuring the classic opening line «Once upon a time...», promising us a story will follow. And so it does – in an unusual way: The filmmaker and his crew travel through Thailand from the north to the south. They ask the people they meet on the road to continue telling a story about a disabled boy and his teacher Dokfa. As the journey continues, we watch and listen to the story gradually unfolding, being pieced together bit by bit. A fish seller, a tipsy old woman, elephant keepers, a Thai boxer, two mute teenage girls, schoolchildren on the playground and many other people: They all contribute episodes to the narrative, which grows, spreads and meanders through the film.

As a result of the numerous embellishments and the imaginative flights of the multiple storytellers, the narrative takes on elements of science fiction, soap opera, fantasy, television news and folk legends. It becomes a lavish, colorful conglomerate. Parts of the story are staged as a film within the film with unprofessional actors. A village even performs its episode as a traditional folk drama, complete with open-air stage, traditional orchestra and applause at the end of the episode.



Storytellers in *Dokfa nai meu marn*

The filmmaker found his inspiration for this film in the method of *cadavre exquis*, a game practiced by surrealist artists<sup>55</sup>: The first participant draws part of a picture, then covers it and hands it over to the next person, who continues the drawing before passing it on again, and so on. Though this technique may stem from the Paris surrealists around André Breton, it is hardly a coincidence that as a principle for film narrative it works so well in a Thai context, where the concept of the active audience has been popular for centuries and the audience feels comfortable in its role as co-narrator and in improvisation.

Besides being a kind of serial novel, *Mysterious Object at Noon* also is an anthropological observation of the Thai population. The ethnic and social origins of the people who participate in this community project are as diverse as the ideas and the modes of narration. Travelling through the country, we catch glimpses of everyday life and its regional specifics. We also encounter many different storytellers and observe their individual personal expressions: some of them are serious, others giggle; some seem melancholy, others cheerful. While some carefully search for the right words, others gleefully pour out their ideas.

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<sup>55</sup> Apichatpong Weerasethakul, in a discussion, April 2005.

The opening promise of «Once upon a time...» turns out to be trickier than expected. Usually these formulas serves as an initiation to a fictional world the audience is totally immersed in and separates from only at the end of the story, which often features, as a closing formula, the written words «The End», signifying the definite closure of the fictional, imaginary world. Here, the boundaries between fiction and reality are not nearly as clear. Is the film a documentary or a fictional film? It shows the manufacturing of fiction as well as the result: fiction in its moment of creation, unfolding before our eyes. At the same time, it documents storytelling as it tells the story of Dokfar. Filmmaking as practiced here is an homage to storytelling itself, to the storytelling of others and to the liveliness of imagination that it can inspire. Storytelling in *Mysterious Object at Noon* is spontaneous, playful, and highly democratic. The emphasis lies on the aspect of storytelling as performance, happening in the present, and the story that is passed on and on, ever changing. The pleasure of it all lies not so much in finding the story's definite, balanced form or structure, but in witnessing the tale evolving wildly and unforeseeably.

#### **4.2 Fiction, Interrupted: Excessive Unreality and the Aesthetics of Discontinuity**

While performativity inhabits a vital part of Thai cultural representation, Thainess – as a sense of national belonging – is not essential, but performed. It would seem that a significant part of this national identity consists in its own self-enactment.

The performativity of Thainess is apparent in recent Thai film and its referential relationship to classical dramatic forms and oral traditions, as well as its taste for subjects drawn from Thai history and folklore. How do local audiences perceive it? When asked about the reception of Thainess in recent movies, Viraporn Kitikumkanjorn, a teacher of film studies at Chiang Mai University, states, «Thainess is a widely debated topic that shows very little consensus. It is up for discussion and rather controversial whether it exists at all, and if so, what it consists of.» She further stresses the necessity of discussing cinematic Thainess on various levels: Content as well as atmosphere, form, humour, and so forth.<sup>56</sup>

Chalida Uabumrungjit, the coordinator of the Thai Film Foundation, said of mainstream Thai film to an interviewer: «If I had to give Thai film style a name, I would call it ‘neo-unrealist’.» (Anchalee 1997). She sees the expression of non-realism as a key concept of Thai film style. According to her, being unrealistic often stems from an unsuccessful attempt to portray reality that does not succeed due to its effort to make things unmistakably clear to the audience. The effect «vaguely resembles surrealism, but in fact it is not». As an example, she mentions the expression of emotions according to clear-cut patterns that Thai people are unlikely to follow in real life, such as verbal declarations of love.

While the unrealistic effect Chalida speaks of may result in some cases from an awkwardness that gives the scenes an involuntary comic undertone, its frequent appearance might also have other, more deliberate sources: a limited concern with realism, as well as an appreciation of fictional metalevels, made visible by enhanced performativity and a stylization of filmic artificiality on various levels of expression. Mainstream Thai film does not aim to create the illusion of reality. On the contrary,

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<sup>56</sup> Viraporn Kitikumkanjorn, in a conversation with the author, November 2006.

cinematic illusion is often disrupted, at times repeatedly, as if the films intended to alert their audience to the fact that the audience is viewing a manufactured, artificial structure. By commenting on their own artificiality, films raise the audience's consciousness of cinematic illusionism (Chatman 1978, 252).

Thai film experts and scholars confirm this impression. Dome Sukwong, a film historian and the head of the Thai National Film Archive, characterises the aesthetic mode of mainstream Thai film as *tingtaeng* (markedly unreal, visually excessive and artificial). He locates its roots in the Thai tradition of *likay*, a folk drama form that aims for pure entertainment value, cultivates a sense of nonrealist escapism and emphasizes the nature of entertainment as artefact.<sup>57</sup>

Based on his observations on traditional folk theatre, Thai scholar Chetana Nagavajara derives four basic principles of the local theatrical practice: The frequent use of improvisation as a performing practice; the constant alternation between prose and verse, speaking and singing, narrating and acting; the fluid line between actor and audience; and the fact that all people involved, both actors and audience, are always aware that they are engaged in a play in which complete dramatic illusion is not an aim. These characteristics shape what Chetana calls the aesthetics of discontinuity, an artistic principle that is vital for Thai performing arts (Chetana 1996, 239ff.). It employs a variety of expressive modes: singing, music, dance, narration, and acting. The practice of performing is marked by the combination of, and frequent changing between, these modes:

On the surface, the shifting from one mode of expression to another may give an air of haphazardness, but at the root of this practice lies a deliberate stratagem, an artistic principle, which, for want of a better term, may be called an aesthetics of discontinuity. The uninitiated might condemn this convention as lack of discipline, and those schooled in the tradition of, say, the French *tragédie classique* would find the Thai theatre a little chaotic. In actual fact such a theatre demands a very high level of artistry from dramatists, directors, and actors alike, an artistry that they have spent long years to master. (Chetana 1996, 239)

The dramatists must constantly adapt to the interplay of different expressive modes and remain flexible for improvisation as well as the interceding of an audience that is free to join in and comment on the play. As for the audience, the viewing pleasure lies in cognitively linking the performative episodes and creating a continuity of dramatic

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<sup>57</sup> Dome Sukwong, in a conversation with the author, February 2004.

illusion, while remaining aware of its fragility. This illusion is, by implied understanding, a kind of game: the attraction is not to immerse oneself in a fictional world, but rather to toy with it, or to be toyed with by it, perhaps simultaneously. Thus, the audience remains constantly aware of the dramatic illusion as a performed artefact.<sup>58</sup>

These conventions of theatrical practice have, over time, shaped the viewing habits of the local audience, and continue to show an impact on movie audiences. This may explain a local cinematic parallel to the aesthetics of discontinuity as sketched by Chetana: the inconsistency of *mise-en-scène*. Cinematic discontinuity has appeared throughout local film history on multiple levels, both intentionally and unintentionally: in editing as continuity errors, in the disruption of diegesis through metafictional elements, in the artificiality brought about by stylistic excess (the aforementioned *tingtaeng*), as well as in the synchronization of image and sound. While cinematic discontinuity has long been ascribed to an awkwardness and lack of cinematic expertise, as in the passage at the beginning of this chapter, it may also be regarded as the present-day continuation of a traditional, locally developed aesthetics, a sort of performative *mise-en-scène*.

This aesthetics is recently being rediscovered. For example, live dubbing, *pak*, was practised extensively in Thai film history from the silent era on, at first to translate intertitles and later to provide narration, using the form of narration employed in Thai *khon* (masked drama). This proved a simple and effective way of solving language problems with foreign films. After World War II, 35mm film was in short supply and expensive, so it became standard practice to shoot on 16mm stock without sound and to dub the films live during the screening or, from the 1970s on, in the studio during postproduction. Over time, Thai audiences became used to a typical characteristic of dubbed voices: they often sound unnaturally flat, since usually recorded in a closed space acoustically unlike the space the image was recorded in. Also, the lip-synching is

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<sup>58</sup> This might call to mind the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. As Chetana 1996 points out, Brecht's alienation effect bears similarities to the aesthetic effect of traditional Thai drama (98). However, the background of this illusion differs greatly from that of Brecht's theory, especially with regard to the explicitly political dimension of the latter. It is doubtful whether the parallels extend far beyond the level of appearance and effect.

occasionally slightly off the mark, adding to the unnatural effect (Chalida 2001, 130). While this artificiality was once regarded as a sign of ineptitude and technical inferiority, audiences have recently come to discover a certain nostalgic charm in its naivete.

### **Ruptured Mise-en-scène and Notions of Realism**

The discontinuous aesthetics of mise-en-scène lead us to the question of realism: if formulaicism, metafiction and the oscillating of expressive modes are central, which shape does the notion of realism take, and what space does it inhabit? Found throughout the history of Thai mainstream film is a specific conception of realism as conveyed by representation and performance, as opposed to the originally Western emphasis on realism as naturalistic verisimilitude. Cinematic realism, in this line of understanding, is not so much based on the naturalistic depiction of what is visually present, but rather on the notion that the essences of ideas, emotions and relations are represented by visual appearances. The high regard given to representation and performance goes hand in hand with the previously mentioned episteme of surface appearances and the regime of images, as described by Jackson. Whether a film appears naturalistic is, from the traditional perspective of the local audience, simply not the point; much more important is what the film signifies and represents. If the local audience deems the film to be adequate, morally sound and interesting, it will readily suspend its disbelief regarding the degree of realism that the film displays. This is especially clear in the case of often highly unrealistic performance inserts and musical numbers.

Hence, the consistency of mise-en-scène is less important in this context than it is in Hollywood's classical narrative mode. The appearance of this inconsistency was neither deliberate nor a sign of primitive naiveté, but often had economic reasons, and its acceptance by local viewers is indicative of a culture whose notion of realism differs from that of modern-day Western mainstream cinema.<sup>59</sup> It is telling that European studies

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<sup>59</sup> White 2002 describes the Southeast Asian conception of cinematic realism and its connection with inconsistent mise-en-scène in Singaporean horror films of the 1950s and

of Thai cinema often continue to take Western notions of realism as their point of departure, and observe something along the lines of «a constant slight gap between form and realism» (Fouquet 1988, 365).

A propos of culturally differing notions of realism, it may be noted that, in the Thai performing arts, fictional worlds require definite boundaries. Fiction is sharply delimited from the perceived reality; it is clearly established and ultimately dissolved.

One way of achieving this establishment and its dissolution is by explicitly stating the contract between the fictional illusion and its audience, as in the opening sequence of every *likay* performance. The central actor and narrator always introduces himself with: «My fictitious name, according to the play now presented to you, is ... ». Thai classical theatre has adapted this introductory form and begins with: «We shall narrate to you the story of ... » (Chetana 1996, 239; Mattani 1996, 184). These fixed introductions are speech acts operating on a narrative metalevel. They ritually establish the fictional world and function as a code, signaling to all involved: illusion has now begun!<sup>60</sup> Like a magic spell, they banish any potential believability of the fictional structure, serving as a safety net for the audience's orientation between the real and the imaginary.

Fiction seems to need patronage, to be passed on mindfully; while this was, in earlier times, guaranteed by teachers and respected narrators, it is increasingly now form that provides the reassurance. As we have seen, transgressions between the fictional world and the audience are vital to local performances (Fouquet 1988, 47). Perhaps the boundaries are crossed with such ease for the very reason that they are so unmistakably marked; thus, the danger of getting lost between the real and the imaginary is less than it would be with blurred boundaries.

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1960s based on Malay mythology. See also Hamilton 1992, 1994 and 2002 on the topic of modernity and cinematic realism in Thailand.

<sup>60</sup> Chetana Nagavajara, in a conversation with the author, February 2007.



The scepticism towards the illusion that entertainment creates is playfully reflected in *Mon-Rak Transistor*. It is Paen's dream to become a *luuk thung* singer, and the world of colorful costumes, bright stage lights and emotional songs lures him away from his wife, peaceful country home and army duties. As this dream fades, he is forced on a long odyssey that leads him through pain, suffering and hardship: entertainment can be dangerous if believed in too strongly. Paen's show business dreams cloud his view of reality and cause him and his loved ones much suffering.

It is hardly a coincidence that the man that Sadao, Paen's wife, falls for during her husband's absence is a medicine salesman with a sideline as a film projectionist. Here, too, illusionism is at play: The projectionist visits the village with a *nang khai ya*, a film show to promote his medicine sales, to attract the villagers' attention. This is not the only show he puts on; he also sweet-talks Sadao in order to seduce her. During the movie screening, he performs a live dubbing of the film. As a love scene unfolds on screen, he substitutes the heroine's name with «Sadao» and fixes his longing gaze on her. So flattering is this public and half-fictional courtship that Sadao can no longer resist, only to realize later, with bitterness, that the traveling salesman has deserted her.

Chetana Nagavajara sees one reason for the clear marking and the occasional disruption of fiction in the simple fact that complete illusion bores a Thai audience. The interplay between illusion and its disclosure is far more attractive, and it is an underlying principle of any Thai entertainment: a love of playfulness and changeability seems inherent in Thai performing arts.<sup>61</sup>

A second reason, in Chetana's opinion, lies in the Theravada Buddhist background of Thai culture. Art involving human emotion, both on the side of the creator and of the receiver, creates pleasure and enjoyment, arousing worldly desires which are, according to Buddhist belief, the cause of adherence to the world and therefore suffering. Thai artists seem to be conscious of the potential power of their works to mislead and intoxicate (Mattani 1983, 20). For this reason, the artists constantly warn the audience against overindulgence in pleasures, which are inconsistent and ephemeral. The passing

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<sup>61</sup> Chetana Nagavajara, in a conversation with the author, February 2007.

of pleasures causes sadness, anger, and other negative emotions, as well as a desire for more pleasure, keeping the endless human cycle of pleasure and suffering in motion (Keown 2001, 65).

Furthermore, the Buddhist principles of *anicca* (inconsistency) and *anatta* (being without a true self) might be influential. *Anicca* means the true nature of things as being in constant change (Keown 2001, 67). All beings are therefore unstable and unreliable, as it is only a matter of time until change takes place, and inevitable change creates an endless cycle. The relationship between all worldly phenomena is characterized by their interchanging and by the rule of cause and effect, which keeps the cycle of change in perpetual movement. At the root of this universal causality lies the principle of *anatta*: nothing exists outside of the interconnectedness of all things, thus, no single thing has an existence of its own, independent of others. The notion of things being consistent and lasting is at base an illusion. Breaking fictional illusion may be a hint, possibly subconscious, at the inconstancy and mutability of the world, applying these basic principles to the construction and, as we have seen, to the occasional and temporary disclosure of fictional illusion.<sup>62</sup> The enjoyment of pleasure seems to be acceptable, even desirable, as long as it is combined with a certain distance that allows for reflection. Unreflected pleasure is what is dubious.

Over time, the concern with naturalistic verisimilitude has become increasingly important in Thai viewing habits, due to the growing popularity of Hollywood movies since the 1950s, the arrival of television broadcasting, and the reception of European art-house cinema. Today's audiences show a gradual shift in perception of traditional films. A changing concept of realism means that what was, in earlier decades and by previous generations, perceived seriously as scary, sad, or dramatic, is now increasingly perceived as camp. As a result of its intellectual history, however, «realism» still means something fundamentally different in the Thai context, based on representation rather than on verisimilitude, or, in semiotic terms, on the signifier rather than on the signified. The

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<sup>62</sup> Chetana Nagavajara, in a conversation with the author, February 2007.

residue of this notion continues to show its impact on audience expectations in Thailand as well as in the Southeast Asian region.

### **Realism and Representation: Performing National Identity**

In scholarly discussion, the advent of realism into non-Western societies is usually seen as connected to the advent of the modern novel, and, in a wider frame, of modernity and modern subjectivity. The concept of fiction is a direct Western import to Thailand that has been developed in a relatively short time. The modern novel was introduced to Thailand from Europe and the USA at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and first local imitations were published in the 1930s, forming the early Thai novel (Manich 2002(2), 174ff., and Wibha 1975, 81). After contact with the West intensified under King Rama IV, local prose developed rapidly (Mattani 1988, 51), bringing with it a gradual shift from orality to literacy.

In traditional Thai literature, poetry holds a much more important place than prose. Mythical stories in verse form express emotions and beliefs by suggesting essential truths behind the storyline; the aesthetic focus lies on versification rather than on realist description (Mattani 1988, 52). These stories are tales of extraordinary beings, nonhuman or supernatural: animals, kings, scholars, royals, demons, and ascetics. Since the characters are of royal or otherwise high descent and status, the storylines do not feature the common human world of everyday life, but instead miracles and wonders; they are plot-driven, rather than interested in individual psychology (Wibha 1975, 133).

The aesthetics of literary convention concentrates on the praise of Buddha and the description of beauty, for instance the beauty of nature. While not necessarily mutually exclusive, truth and beauty are separate concepts: the description of a beautiful garden might well include descriptions of plants that do not exist, but whose imaginary beauty justifies their appearance in the poem (Mattani 1983, 9). Therefore, what is beautiful is not necessarily true or real.

After 1850, modern Western prose introduced completely new elements that stood in strong contrast with the aesthetics and concept of traditional literature: namely, the use of real world characters and settings, a focus on the inner world of the characters who form the story, a belief in social individualism, and social criticism (Wibha 1975, 111 and 133). This meant a crucial change for the concept of realism, a shift from apprehending reality as the poetic formulation of essential truths towards aspiring to naturalistic portrayals.

The shift did not happen without arousing consternation: in its early period during the 1920s, local realist fiction was objected to as too close to reality. While the traditional poets would camouflage social reality and criticism with the help of poetic imagination, modern Thai novelists struggled with public disapproval (Mattani 1988, 58). The novelty and revolutionary force of modernity inherent in Western literary realism naturally met heightened resistance in societies that are strongly concerned with conserving traditions. Western literary modernity is closely linked to criticism and individualism. The result has been that this modernity and its prime exponent, the realist novel, occupy a potentially ambivalent position in Southeast Asian societies that have traditionally placed high value on collectivity, conformity and harmonious presentation.

The revolutionary novelties introduced by literary modernity prompted concern and resistance on the part of more traditionally-minded parties. As a result of the tension created by modernity, artists frequently negotiated it with a recourse to premodern forms and tropes, along with the invocation of Thainess. This movement can be observed in mainstream Thai cinema as well. As we have seen, mainstream Thai cinema shows a tendency towards premodern narrative structures influenced by orality and traditional storytelling, displaying excessive unreality and high artificiality. In this way, it models a concept of realism as representation, as opposed to modern naturalism.

The reappearance of the premodern and the references to the past can be seen as attempts to answer the enquiries of modernity, to counterbalance the uncertainties and insecurities that it has brought into prevalent notions of identity, subjectivity and the role of

representation. By reestablishing the past in the realm of the modern medium of cinema, the urgency of the changes brought about by modernity are moderated, and perhaps also, in a postmodern stance, playfully renegotiated.

The past is irrevocably gone, however, all the more so after the rapid changes Thailand has undergone in recent decades of industrialization and technologization. For this reason, identity is reconfirmed and performed not via the past itself, but via an imaginary version of it – what it is believed or desired to have been like. The past thus becomes an ahistorical pastiche, in accordance with Fredric Jameson's characterization of postmodernity as being ahistorical or of a pastiche historicity (Jameson 1991).

The re-imagining of the past, of the nation and of traditional modes of cultural expression is especially apparent at critical times, when identity, as hitherto known, is acutely questioned, such as by the proclamation of globalization, heightened transnational currents, and the dissolving of nations and the questioning of national stability. The fact that the re-imagining of identity is a performative act explains its frequent reenactment: it must be ceaselessly repeated in order to retain its validity.

### **Subversive Performativity**

At times, the re-imagining of the past and the national is taken to a metalevel, heightening the films' sense of performativity. This may happen on the level of story content, as discussed previously with regard to the retelling of stories, and in an especially direct way through dialogue that cross-references the films' own «Thainess», like the remarks in *Buppha Ratree* about Thai movies, or in *Mon-Rak Transistor* about Thai actors being more appealing than foreign ones.

Film form, similarly, becomes self-referential by stylization of its classical characteristics. The most obvious expression of metacommentary are the visually excessive, «unrealistic» performance inserts described in the previous chapter. More often than not, this metacommentary is ironic. It demonstrates an acute awareness of the

constructedness and the performativity of identity. While the awareness of narrative structure and the constructedness of identity are characteristic of postmodernity, they also revert to performativity as an essential part of traditional culture.

If form mirrors ideology, as Jameson has shown (1981), and is therefore inherently political, then a humorously displayed awareness of formal conventions means a subversive handling of current ideology. When performativity becomes transparent, the mechanisms of the «regime of images» and its strict control of surface appearances become apparent. Subversive performativity on the part of the audience creates a second, unofficial, informal mode of reception: the often ironic awareness of make-believe and role-play. Thainess as the performance of national identity is subverted when its performative nature is laid open, as the following example will illustrate.

After the end credits of *Monrak Transistor*, an insert of white on black writing appears, reading «Made in Thailand». Set at the end of the movie, this image conveys a complex meaning. On the one hand, it is a celebration of local production, of homemade film – *Monrak Transistor* emerged in 2001, at the cusp of what was, at the time, proclaimed to be New Thai Cinema, the post-1997 emergence of semi-independent film with artistic aspirations and high production values. An important recurring feature of these films, however, is the ironic or pastiche handling of local film history and Thainess.

«Made in Thailand» also refers to the product label found on all sorts of consumer goods and often implying an image of low-wage production, of being inferior in quality to imported goods (see chapter 2). Since the movie thematizes, amongst other subjects, the hardship and poverty of working-class people in Thailand, the text's reference to cheap labour adds a sense of ambivalence and concern to the level of homage and slight ironization. The multiple meanings that the film creates here are symptomatic of the positions Thai film inhabits in relation to its role as national production and as consumer product in a global marketplace. Self-referentially, *Monrak Transistor* not only names but even performs its own status of production, its being made in Thailand, displaying full

awareness of the complex implications of this label. This written insert thus becomes a commentary on the state of Thai film and its search for a place in globalized cinema.



Final image of *Monrak Transistor*

### 4.3 Negotiating Thainess: Independent Cinema

Finally, I would like to inquire into how recent independent Thai film deals with performativity and performed Thainess. As pointed out earlier, independent film enjoys greater artistic freedom than the mainstream, since it stands apart from the formulaicism and the financial pressures that burden productions by major companies. The avoidance of mainstream film style is in fact a conscious stance of many independent filmmakers against the formulaicism and the cultural conservatism of the mainstream. By opposition, independent film seeks out new forms of expression, several of which we will now examine more closely in order to complement the description of contemporary Thai cinema as a whole.

To be sure, economic independency does not equal liberation from state approval. Visual media are a sensitive area in a society highly concerned with the appearance of things and with the conformity of public imagery. Finding a way to express oneself without being restricted by censorship remains a challenge to Thai filmmakers, all the more since the introduction of the new, stricter censorship law in 2008. In what follows, I shall examine the work of several independent filmmakers and the ways they negotiate Thainess.

#### **Between the Lines: *Jao Nok Krajok* and *Saeng Sattawat***

Anocha Suwichakornpong's feature debut *Jao Nok Krajok* (*Mundane History*, 2009) is a family drama that reaches beyond its boundaries to contemplate life, death and the passing of all things. Ake is a young man bedridden after an accident leaves him paralyzed from the waist down. He struggles to come to terms with his new life, often venting his frustration on Pun, a male nurse hired to care for him. Pun is the only person who deals with Ake's resentment and pent-up energy; otherwise, the large mansion in which they live seems empty, inhabited by a distant, elusive father and a few servants who keep to themselves. Gradually and carefully, Ake and Pun open up to each other, building a relationship that reawakens Ake's vitality and softens his resentment. The growing trust and the exchange of dialogue between them contrasts with the estrangement between Ake and his often absent father, a tight-lipped, introverted patriarch whose coldness seems all the more chilling as he is Ake's only parent, the



mother having passed away years ago. The dynamic of this failed family is atmospherically dense and seems to be the film's main objective during its first part. The narrative linearity is then ruptured. A scene of Ake and Pun visiting a planetarium is abruptly followed by computer-generated images of a supernova: accompanied by melancholy music, the camera circles a blindingly bright star that finally explodes. From this point on, the film continues in loosely linked fragments, developing a timeline that jumps back and forth between several events. As Ake and Pun visit the planetarium show and later lie on a lawn and gaze into the sky, they talk about the vastness and emptiness of the universe. Their conversation wanders from the fact that stars have their own beginnings and endings to the fleetingness of life and human existence facing this karmic cycle.

Alternating with this dialogue, we see shots of Pun freeing little sparrows from a cage. In Thailand, these *nok krajok*, the birds in the films' Thai title, are caught and caged, then bought and let free for making merit. The motif of the bird had already appeared in a story Ake told Pun earlier in the film, associating himself with the bird and its longing for freedom, and with the birdcage in the house that at the end of the film will be empty. Another thread of the story is created by Pun asking Ake how the accident that led to his paralysis occurred. Ake does not answer. Instead, the editing intersperses images of Ake's father steering his sports car into the driveway, wandering around the house, gazing out over the lawn lost in thought, and of Ake and his father seated in the car. While the film does not unveil the exact circumstances of Ake's accident, it strongly suggests his father's involvement.

Finally, the suggestive images of the father-son relationship are interspersed with archival footage of recent demonstrations in Bangkok, held by the antiroyalist party and marked by unrest, military intervention and an atmosphere of looming violence.

*Mundane History* slowly reveals its cosmic aspiration. By way of non-linear, fragmented storytelling, it becomes an experimental reflection on the human condition: the cycle shaped by life, death, and rebirth, which is a cosmic cycle as well as a karmic loop. This condition applies to biology, astronomy, metaphysics and politics. Life, as the film

suggests, is repetitive and ephemeral, forever starting anew and falling apart. This mundaneness of stories and histories merits closer contemplation, as it forms the universe we live in. Using realism in acting and photography and a script that plays on subtleties and innuendo, *Mundane History* could hardly be stylistically more different from mainstream Thai genre cinema and its appreciation of surface aesthetics.

By including the nation amongst the entities whose lives are finite, the filmmaker inscribes a political dimension into the film, making her statement between the lines. By depicting the demonstrating masses and paralleling the nation-state of contemporary Thailand with the family's house and the estranged relationships inside it, Anocha indirectly comments on the political chaos and instability of recent years, brought on by the election of Thaksin Shinawatra as prime minister and the ensuing polarization of the nation between royalist and populist parties. Combining the storyline of the disrupted father-son relationship and the topic of the passing of all things, *Mundane History* touches on the ubiquitous yet unspoken fear of change and disorder, as well as vague unease about the end times being near – both pervasive sentiments in the Thai nation at the end of the new millennium's first decade. This state of mind, as well as the film's comment on it, naturally relativizes the national myth of the Thai nation as an everlasting and unquestionable institution. Change, it seems, is inevitable; at the same time, it will hardly alter basic conditions. As the film closes, a long last shot shows a Caesarean section. The camera closes in on a baby being born, crying loudly. The director comments on this ending of her film as depicting a new beginning, yet one that does not necessarily suggest hope: «The baby girl enters this world and just cries her heart out. After a while she seems to calm down, but right at this moment, they cut her umbilical cord, which I find heartbreaking.»<sup>63</sup>

A similar way of dealing with Thainess and commenting on the state of the nation appears in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's feature film *Saeng Sattawat* (*Syndromes and a*

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<sup>63</sup> Anocha Suwichakornpong, at the question-and-answer session after a screening of *Mundane History* at the Bangkok World Film Festival, November 12, 2009.

*Century*, 2006). Here, too, Thainess is referred to indirectly, via symbols, atmosphere, and what might be a parable.

The film sets out in a provincial hospital, sometime in the 1970s or 1980s, the era of the filmmaker's childhood. The film is comprised of a loosely connected series of episodes, portraying a female doctor being courted by a shy suitor, a dentist befriending a monk, and several doctors diagnosing patients. Budding relationships are tentatively sketched, along with sometimes quirky dialogue about traditional Thai healing methods and herbal remedies. The hospital is a lively site of human warmth, and the film's scenes unfold in airy rooms and outdoors, in flower markets and gardens, displaying verdant nature basking in sunlight. While a mysterious air pervades the episodes, it is almost certainly benign. Nature seems in harmony with human life, as a short scene showing a solar eclipse suggests.



Stills from the first half of *Saeng Sattawat*...

The film's second half, however, leaps forward in time and is set in a present that seems modern, even futuristic. The hospital now has gleaming white surfaces, high-tech equipment and glaring, cold fluorescent lighting. The only glimpse of the outdoors comes through a window high above ground that reveals urban surroundings. Sterile interiors with glass and steel furnishings have replaced the natural green and wood tones of the first half of the feature. The film still focuses on human encounters, and strangely, some events from the past repeat themselves literally; however, they seem more random, fragmented, and cold. A doctor meets his girlfriend in his office; they share an intimate moment, but the ensuing conversation reveals that distance might soon come between

them. Later, the same doctor speaks to a youngster loitering in the hallway, but the two of them do not find a connection through the awkward dialogue. The warm-hearted nostalgia has disappeared, and the quirky humour now tends toward the absurd. A sense of perplexity grows, enforced by narration that refuses to clarify how the individual episodes cohere.



... and from the second half

Eventually, the mysterious atmosphere develops a sharp edge as the film moves to the hospital's basement floor. Here, a darker side of the institution reveals itself. While the upper floors of the hospital appear modern, coolly businesslike and properly clinical, its underground harbours castaways: crippled bodies practice walking with prostheses, a rebellious teenager undergoes mystical chakra treatments, and elderly doctors furtively share sips of whisky from a bottle hidden in an artificial leg.

The apocalyptic atmosphere climaxes toward the end of the film, as we follow long Steadicam-like tracking shots through dark basement hallways, accompanied by strange, muffled droning and humming sounds. As the rooms become more and more devoid of human beings, the camera intersperses images of a Buddha statue, as well as of statues of King Chulalongkorn and of the present king. The sequence ends with an enigma. After the camera enters a large room where a jumble of machine parts are stored, it circles and pans through the space, until it finally focuses on the open end of a ventilation tube that juts from a wall. The shot closes in on the tube's opening, a vacuum that slowly sucks in white swaths of steam that drift around the room. The institution seems to absorb itself in an enigmatic, ghostly manner, devoid of sense and humanized presence. The image of the

ventilating tube appears like an absurd ending point of a tour of the hospital, during which its inhuman, uncanny aspects become more and more dominant.



The ventilating tube in *Saeng Sattawat*

Even after its successful tour of the festival circuit, *Saeng Sattawat* became a Thai censorship case. Before its theatrical release, the censorship authorities ordered that four scenes be cut. Apichatpong, however, refused and canceled the Thai release of the film, after which the board of censors confiscated the print and returned it to the director only after lengthy interventions. A limited release followed some months later. The film was shown at a few screenings only, with the censored scenes replaced with scratchy black strips of film. The local independent film scene demonstrated solidarity with Apichatpong and launched the petition «Help Free Thai Cinema». The petition, which proposed a liberalisation of the strict censorship rules, was unfortunately ignored by the state authorities.

The censors' verdict was received by public voices as absurd, all the more so because the four scenes in question hardly seem scandalous. They show a group of doctors drinking whisky, a group of monks playing with a remote-control helicopter and making music, and a doctor kissing his girlfriend. Seen in the context of the film's atmosphere, though, it becomes more obvious what may have been unsettling to censors concerned the depiction of the state and of Thainess. While the film's political aspect remains unspoken, the atmosphere evokes a vague unease, and increasingly, an indirect parallel forms between the medical institution and that of the nation-state: Nostalgia for the past is in contrast with the weirdness and soullessness of the present, where things are obviously askew,

though it is hard to pinpoint just exactly what is the institution's problem. Authorities and their iconic public depiction clearly play a role. As in *Mundane History*, the film transmits an impression that the end times are at hand, and evokes anxiety and, towards the end, even claustrophobia.

**Revisiting Performance Traditions: *Isarn Special* and Apichatpong's Early Work**

Mingmongkol Sonakul's debut film *Kuen pra chan tem doueng (Isarn Special, 2002)* starts with atmospheric shots of Mor Chit, Bangkok's northern bus terminal, around sunset. It's a busy, bustling place, with people from all walks of life up and about, passengers waiting to depart, and vendors selling food. As a group of travelers sets out on a long-distance bus, so does the movie. The group travels to Nong Bua, a small village in Isarn, in northeastern Thailand. It is a full moon that night, and as so often, the full moon creates a special mood and announces the approach of something extraordinary. After a while, a young female passenger gets up and asks the driver to switch off the radio that has been broadcasting a radio soap opera, a popular Thai audio format. As she goes back to her seat, she starts to take over the part of Phenprapah, the heroine of the show. One by one, the other passengers join in. Some play minor roles, like that of a supermarket cashier or of Phen's landlord; others take on larger parts, such as the handsome hero who pursues Phen or the evil older woman. While this happens, the passengers' appearance remains largely the same, they do not change costumes or their style of gesture or mime. Mostly they remain seated, with the characters acting out the scene usually in the foreground, grouped together according to their interactions, and the momentarily silent characters in the back of the bus.



Still from *Kuen pra chan tem doueng*

In this way, the bus becomes a setting for an imaginary world, that of the radio soap opera, which comes into existence through the passengers' performances. It seems as if the full moon casts a kind of magic spell on the bus and the journey, creating a parallel world to that of the passengers' real lives. In the filmic diegesis, a second, aural diegesis is inserted; this double narrative goes on for as long as the bus keeps moving. The bus interior is brightly lit as it moves through the darkness, like a kind of moving stage in a darkened auditorium space; the only other source of light is the full moon. During rest stops and a breakdown, the passengers' normal, everyday life goes on as usual. They get to know each other, strike up conversations or ponder their return to the village. They «become themselves» again, changing back to their familiar voices, down-to-earth vocabulary and accents, which are *isarn* (northeastern Thai), Burmese or *farang* (Western), as opposed to the high-class, Bangkok accents and elaborate speech of the soap voices.

Remarkably, the characters do not speak the parts of their soap opera alter egos themselves. They are dubbed by real-life, local soap stars, whose voices might well be recognized by a Thai audience. It is therefore a mystery where the soundtrack comes from: since the radio is off, the sound and the dialogue cannot possibly be diegetic. It is not produced by anyone or anything onscreen, but seems to accompany the story from out of nowhere.

The characters' naturalistic acting style is combined with a grainy, slightly rough look that was probably achieved by underexposing the film stock during shooting and pushing it later on, during its development in the lab. This results in an aesthetics usually found in *cinéma vérité* or low-budget productions, suggesting an aspiration to realism and a break with the classical narrative mode; worldwide, it is often deliberately contrasted with the glamorous, high-key aesthetics of expensive blockbuster productions. As such, the film's aesthetics is in line with the documentary look of the opening scenes at the bus terminal as well as with the portrayal of working class people and their concerns.

This naturalistic style stands in strong contrast to the artificiality of the generic, formulaic soap opera, heightening the surreal effect of the soap scenes and emphasizing their magical nature. The reality of the diegetic characters is suspended in favor of the soap world. There is no visual differentiation between the sphere of the diegetic reality and that of the inserted performed world. A shift does occur, however, in our perception. As we watch actors play characters who play soap characters, sooner or later we figure out how the film works: the invisible, generic soap images conveyed by the dialogue seem to appear in our mind, superimposing the images on the movie screen. Every now and then, our perception creates reality from the dialogue: as it refers to the setting as «a condominium» or «a waterfall», these images might magically pop up. For a moment we overlook the fact that it's just a performance, even a lip-synched one, and develop a kind of double vision, just as the film is structured by a double narrative.

Occasionally, the narratives and the viewing activities merge, providing insight into the power of performance and the pleasure that dramatic illusion provides. The boundaries between reality and the fantastic are definitely blurred when the passengers fall asleep late at night and the bus stops to let a *phii*, a Thai-style movie ghost, get on the bus. As day breaks, everyone wakes up and the soap continues with the ghost aboard as if nothing had happened. Like the radio soap, the ghost is an icon of local popular culture, and its presence amidst the passengers contributes to the strangeness of the fantastic invading the real and mingling with it. With the arrival of the bus in Nong Bua, the soap ends and the fantasy world disappears. It is a common fact that travel sets free the imagination; this



journey, a transient time and space prone to dreams and flights of fantasy, now ends, and everyone goes home.

*Isarn Special* refers to the aesthetics of discontinuity through the use of its performance practice: a cast acting as an ensemble, characters who seem by turns to improvise the radio soap and to narrate their own story. The film also translates the effect of discontinuity into cinematic terms by merging two separate storylines and turning the narrative inconsistencies into magical moments of entertainment. In addition, it alludes to local filmic practices, such as live dubbing, that rupture cinematic illusion. By doing so, it refers to the local mode of cinematic representation dating from the time before US mainstream productions dominated the screens and viewing habits of Southeast Asia. It reflects on differing notions of realism, with an affectionate nod towards local popular entertainment as embodied in the radio soap format and the local star system. *Isarn Special* is thus a part of alternative culture, but at the same time pays homage to local, as opposed to globalized, pop culture. As the director herself states, the concept was to mix different media in order to create an experience that audiences could recognize in various ways, an entertaining experiment with double realities and the interplay of art and life.<sup>64</sup>

The key concepts of regional storytelling traditions are played upon similarly in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's short films *Mae Ya Nang* (*Like the Relentless Fury of the Pounding Waves*, 1996) and *Ban Phi Sing* (*Haunted House*, 2001) as well as in his feature debut *Dogfar Nai Meu Marn* (*Mysterious Object at Noon*, 1999). These films, too, work in an experimental mode, involving the audience in multilevel narration and leaving it to the viewer to discern a coherent narrative.<sup>65</sup> In all of these movies, non-professionals imitate pop entertainment and use the methods of improvisation and shared narration. The ethnic and social origins of the people who participate are as diverse as their narrative forms.

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<sup>64</sup> M.L. Mingmongkol Sonakul, in an e-mail to the author (March 14, 2009).

<sup>65</sup> The links between the films are indicative of the ties between the filmmakers who are acquaintances and have worked together in the past. As Mingmongkol's production homepage states, *Isarn Special* was inspired by an idea of Apichatpong's. See <http://www.dedicate-ltd.com/image/isan.html> (retrieved March 3, 2009).

*Like the Relentless Fury of the Pounding Waves* is a short camera trip around a small seaside town on a hot afternoon. The radio that appears time and again in the images is playing a soap episode about an encounter between fishermen and the sea spirit Mae Ya Nang. It becomes the aural backdrop of the documentarist images showing the town's inhabitants; their naturalistically depicted lives and the soap opera are interwoven. There are no hierarchies between the narrative levels, the people's stories and that of the sea spirit are intertwined, linked by the radio waves and the waves on the sea shore. A microcosm emerges: an inventory of a day in a town, with all the beginnings of the stories it might contain. The result is more than the sum of its parts. The people's everyday lives, joined with the radio broadcast of the sea spirit legend, take on a mythic dimension as well.

In *Haunted House*, the filmmaker reshapes two episodes of a Thai TV serial, transplanting their sentimental dramas into six villages in the north of the country. The actors are villagers who play out the soap roles in their own, modest homes. Their performance shows amazing expertise on the part of the amateur actors who dwell on the kitsch, drama and standardized emotional expression of the soap. The artificiality of the soap genre stands in contrast to the simplicity of the rural setting and the earnest dedication of the villagers' acting. The editing style and the use of close-ups are a discreet parody of television language. Thus, the film becomes a study of media reception in a simple farming village.

It is interesting that all of these films display a similar visual style, marked by graininess, low-key lighting, slow camera movements, and a monochrome color scheme or grainy black and white. In *Haunted House* and *Mysterious Object at Noon*, this look is due to the transfer from DV and 16mm, both economical and therefore common stocks for shooting independent films, to the 35mm format. In the case of *Isarn Special*, which was shot on 35mm, the filmmaker aimed to copy this specific style to give the films a special

aesthetics, distinguishing them from smoother-looking mainstream productions and adding a documentary feel.<sup>66</sup>

Whichever way it comes about, this visual style produces a further intended inconsistency: the realist *vérité* style contrasts with the mythological elements, the melodrama and the formulaic structure of the soap plots and dialogues, enhancing their artificiality. What seems to be a narratological clash evolves into an intermingling of clean-cut mainstream forms and a naturalistic, almost anthropological examination of everyday life, in which generic entertainment inhabits an important role.

These movies refer to the aesthetics of discontinuity differently than mainstream genre cinema does. Instead of reproducing and, at times, pastiching or ironizing it, they experiment with structures of narrative discontinuity, the effect it has on the construction of the diegesis, and the questions about realism it prompts. In this way, these films reinterpret and reflect on the effect of traditional film form and narration, reinventing formal Thainess in an experimental, playful way.

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<sup>66</sup> M.L. Mingmongkol Sonakul, in an e-mail to the author (March 14, 2009).

## 5. Conclusions

Thainess is an indisputably major issue in Thai film since 1997. It is manifested across all genres, in the mainstream and in independent film alike. It appears in its most evident form in heritage films, movies that focus on subject matters from a glorified, mythic past, performing an imaginary national identity. This heightened popularity and popularization of cinematic Thainess is merely a part of a wave of nationalism that took place in the late 1990s. It might be seen as a tentative answer in a collective search for identity, triggered by various factors, most importantly by the advent of modernity in Thailand, the emergence of the middle class and its consumer power, and the immense changes that consumerism has brought to the Thai lifestyle, leading to conflict with traditional ways of life and causing great ambivalence. In this context, the Southeast Asian financial crisis that peaked in 1997 marked the climax of the unease caused by modernity, preparing the ground for a revival of interest in local cinema, and in local culture in general.

The concept of Thainess gained additional importance for the film business against the background of the rapidly expanding globalization of the film market and the growing popularity of World Cinema in the West. «Transnationalization» and «multiple modernities» are powerful keywords in contemporary discourse on globalized culture. Their impact on Thai film is without a doubt strong. As Aihwa Ong put it, transnationalism constitutes «new fields of cultural normativity» (Ong 1999, 452). As Thai film entered the international festival circuit, it saw the emergence of new publics and new transnational career opportunities. New financial channels opened. The national production shifted its appearance under the influence of foreign tastes and adapted new genres, such as the martial arts film and the horror film, genres that now stand alongside traditional Thai ghost movies. Foreign viewership became an important factor to be considered in film production. Going *inter* became a widespread ambition, on the one hand, while on the other the accumulation of foreign demands and influences necessitated the continuous reaffirming of national identity. It became all the more important for Thai movies to be *Thai*, even though public discourse continued to lack a consensus of what

Thainess actually consisted of. In fact, the controversy about this issue seems rather telling in this context.

Issues related to transnationalization are anything but new in Thai culture. They have long been crucial in Thai history, alongside discourse on the nation and the concept of Thainess as the official expression of the national.

The tension between Thai and Western culture reaches back to the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851-1868), the age that is generally regarded as the genesis of modernity in Thailand. In the face of Western expansionism, King Mongkut embraced Western technological innovations, initiating the modernization of Siam. He also instituted many social, cultural, economic and religious reforms during his reign, including cultural Westernization of elements of daily life, such as dress, music, conduct, and so on. His son, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1869-1910), continued his father's course of reform. The adaptation to Western culture and lifestyle was a significant part of the rulers' foreign policies and diplomacy: partial assimilation was a strategy thought to help secure the state's freedom from colonization. To counterbalance the state-enforced reforms and new modes of behaviour, the preservation of traditional «Thai culture and values» was emphasized (Chetana 2004(1), 56ff.), firmly establishing a discourse of stark cultural dichotomy that is still going on today.

The mixture and balancing of Thai and foreign cultural elements have remained controversial issues since the nineteenth century, as has the concern of both the state and its citizens with the preservation of traditions and of Thainess. These warrantors of national identity eventually came under the control of state authorities, which in their most authoritarian form have employed and still employ censorship. Unlike other countries, Thailand has never been colonized, so foreign values cannot be situated in the realm of colonizers. This places Thailand in a special situation: the balance between foreign and domestic influences must be fought out between various positions within the country itself (Hamilton 1994, 145-147). Modernization and Westernization were not so much imposed from outside as they were adapted by the state itself and propagated via

the official state ideology. There is thus no foreign scapegoat to take the blame for the side effects of modernization; Thailand itself is held responsible (Chetana 2004(1), 53ff.).

Since Thailand has increasingly been confronted with the influx of foreign cultures, what is perceived as Thai often, when examined up close, proves to be a result of influences from multiple nations. To that effect, many films that are deemed «very Thai» show Western elements. *Suriyothai* (Chatrith Chalerms Yukol, 2001), for instance, features a subject from Thai history and was marketed as *the* Thai film. Yet the film's aesthetics, soundtrack and cinematography are very Hollywood-oriented.

The emphasis on Thainess also appears in cinematic narration and film form. Looking at characteristics of mainstream film – the retelling of stories, rigid genre formulas, stereotypical character design and acting style, emphasized narrative gestures, and performance inserts – a tendency can be seen towards artificiality and heightened unreality. Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis on metafiction, self-referentiality and performativity. While the survey provided by this text on traditional drama and literature must remain cursory, it is evident that both factor in as the traditional background for these characteristics of local contemporary cinema. From its beginnings on, film in Thailand has largely been interpreted against the matrix of older narrative traditions, in particular drama and other performing arts.

As if to acknowledge this fact, recent mainstream films since the mid-nineties show a tendency to return to traditional, pre-modern modes of narration that stem from local drama and literature, and are marked by orality and performativity. Contemporary mainstream film form and narration thus employ Thainess as a trope: they refer to pre-modern concepts of storytelling and eschew modern realism in favor of the representational depiction customary to pre-modern local culture. By doing so, they keep in line with the tendency towards the re-imagining of Thainess and the performance of national identity, expressing it via film form. The recurrence to pre-modern forms as an expression of imagined identity can be understood as an attempt to come to terms with modernity and the change, tensions and ambivalences it brings with it.

By re-imagining Thainess along the lines of traditional culture, mainstream form acts in accordance with the ideology of the official self-representation of the state. Mainstream form conforms to the official identity of Thainess. At the same time, it is also an expression of local culture. On the other hand, independent cinema negotiates Thainess in various alternative ways. It enables the evaluation of and the confrontation with mainstream culture, reflecting it. Both modes complement each other and, in combination, form a complex system of cultural self-reflection and of self-understanding.

### **From Here Onwards: An Outlook and Some Key Issues**

The ways that cinematic representation envision Thainess are naturally strongly linked to the degree of transnationality to which Thai film is exposed. The negotiation of national identity and its frictions with the transnationality of the film industry will probably continue to be an important issue in Thai film culture and theory; it remains to be seen which turns the discourse will take.

The above results open up some crucial issues for future developments of Thai cinema. An important question concerns whether to conserve local culture or to promote transnational expansion. Both options are possible, as is finding a balance between the two; the decision is in the hands of many agents in the film industry. No matter the case, it is highly important that there is adequate interest in filmmaking for the local public. Only by resisting the temptation of catering mainly to foreign entities, whether international rights sales and large events such as Cannes and Venice or the art-house festival circuit for independent productions, and by keeping local audiences in mind, can the local industry develop and sustain the sense of identity it continually stresses, and develop and sustain the local significance it strives for. While it is certainly an accomplishment and an opportunity to be recognized by foreign audiences and industries, whether through sporadic attention at festivals or more generally as producers of interesting cinema, it is also important not to adhere to stereotypes for the sake of box-office figures and awards.

To enable the flourishing of film culture and a continuous relationship with various home audiences, of both mainstream and independent orientations, there is an urgent need for the development and fortification of diversity in local cinema. There is a severe shortage of screening venues for non-mainstream and non-commercial cinema, and of venues for the exchange of film culture. Financial investment and support are needed for independent film, without overburdening it with the pressure of commercialization. In fact, the right locus of investment is a current key point in local cultural politics. Considerable quantities of money and effort are invested in representation abroad, for foreign eyes, for instance to present Thai blockbusters at European A-festivals and film markets. Meanwhile, the lack of supporting cultural infrastructure, such as education, funds, and government policies, presents a great challenge to film culture. Steps in this direction are of great significance for the development of general media literacy and the encouragement of non-mainstream audiovisual culture.

It is imperative to invest in film culture at home in order to keep diversity flourishing and to make film culture a platform for the exchange of ideas. It is only in this way that Thai film can appeal to a wider public, rather than to a limited audience of middle-class festivalgoers, and that it can generate and sustain a local discourse that reflects its own concerns and interests. In this way, it can avoid turning into a one-dimensional replication of stereotypes and self-exoticisation, defining itself through the eyes of others. The subject matter as well as the aesthetics of Thai film both need to evolve through artistic development that reflects the mindset and viewpoint of the country's inhabitants. This evolution, in turn, needs space in which it can display what is on its mind.

Needless to say, freedom of artistic expression is imperative, and censorship has posed and continues to pose a major obstacle for the development of film culture, especially since the issuance of the new censorship bill in 2009. Further developments in this field are uncertain, since political developments are clearly at a turning point at the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as indicated by the increasingly urgent search for political stability and democracy. It remains to be seen how the state will shape its public image and deal with disparate views of itself in the future.



Since the issuance of the new censorship rules, independent film has been increasingly subject to restriction, because noncommercial screenings as well as screenings abroad are now subject to review by the board of censors. But still, financial independence of major production and distribution companies increases the possibilities for artistic independence, since smaller budgets make the need for financial return less pressing. Grassroots filmmaking is of key significance in this respect, as its modest production processes offer filmmakers the highest levels of artistic control.

Another key issue is that of local discourse and theory. While the local film scene has developed steadily during the past decade and has been received internationally, a comparable exchange in local theory seems more of a challenge. This is surely due in large part to the language gap between Thai and foreign-language writing on Thai film; translations of Thai texts are rare, as are English texts written by Thais. Thus, the accessibility of local discourse to non-Thai scholars and other recipients remains limited, as does the exchange between them.

Nonetheless, there is a need for the development of local discourse and film theory that moves beyond the reception of Western theory. Simultaneously, it is crucial that Western discourse on Thai film include and consider local discourse, in order to avoid the cultural hegemony that has long been characteristic of the Western reception of films from foreign regions, for example in analyses of Thai films constructed solely on Western bodies of theory. The goal of discourse on Thai film, be it by local, regional or foreign recipients, should consist in attempts to access Thai cinema and film culture as itself, assessing its variety of appearance and meaning. Such discourse should not adhere solely to Western or Western-oriented theory and regard Thai cinema as an exotic object or as an «indigenous» or Third World Cinema, constantly relating to Hollywood, whether in imitation or opposition.

In his paper on «new ways of seeing Southeast Asian Cinema» (2005), Benjamin McKay states that hegemonic intellectual practices and pedagogies are increasingly being questioned in contemporary discourse, and that newer and more appropriate local

approaches to criticism and analysis are emerging. As he points out, «(t)hose approaches need not necessarily abandon established discourse(s) but they may decide to refine such practices to best enter into an informed dialogue with the films of the region» (McKay 2005, 3). Subsequently, McKay suggests a new critical practice to adequately write about regional film. This practice would characteristically be a contextual rather than a mainly textual approach. By considering modes of production, ideological patterns, and the history of the film industries and cultures they purport to access, analysis and criticism acknowledge the fact that «cultural production does not happen in a vacuum» (McKay 2005, 2) and fine-tune their perception of their object of study, be it mainstream popular cinema or independent film.

Besides addressing economic and political contexts, another important aspect of this discourse would be the geographical realities of Southeast Asian Cinema: does such a thing as Southeast Asian Cinema exist, and how do the various national cinemas of the region contextualize and relate to each other within this grouping? Furthermore, McKay argues, the discourse should be broadly inclusive of film practitioners and journalists, rather than purely academic, corresponding to the regular crossover between people from inside and outside the academe in the region.

As Chetana Nagavajara has pointed out, local theoretical and critical thinking often does not express itself in the form of theoretical texts. Instead, it is implicit in the works of art themselves; it is an artistic strategy not to separate theoretical and creative activities, but to include in art its own poetology (Chetana 2004(3), 327ff.). This is done through a conscious performativity of the artist who restrains his personal emotional involvement and instead maintains a distance toward the work of art that allows him and the recipients to reflect on the creative act. By making his performance transparent, the artist demonstrates his art and skill, showing that he knows how to apply adequate modes of expression to the various elements of the performance. Since Thai intellectual practices differ significantly from Western ones, it seems imperative for Thai and Western theory to acknowledge their differences in approach in order to enable a discourse that crosses cultural boundaries.

To these observations on adequate writing about Thai and Southeast Asian Film, I would like to add that, as a first step in theoretical approach, I consider description to be an elementary task, since it builds a base on which to begin discussion and from which to venture forth. While research and writing on contemporary Thai film is still at an early stage, I hope to have contributed a small part to the ongoing discourse. The wide array of new issues for the future suggests that much remains to be examined, studied and discussed in the field of Thai film, a field that, thanks to its complexity, has proven a highly rewarding and fruitful area of research.

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## Filmography

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*Bang Rajan*, Tanit Jitnukul, 2000

*Bangkok Dangerous*, Danny and Oxide Pang, 1999

*Be... true*, Ajadrawdee Wongsakon, 2004

*Beautiful Boxer*, Ekachai Uekrongtham, 2003

*Boriwen nii yu phai tai gaan gak gan / This Area is Under Quarantine*, Thunskā Pansittivorakul, 2008

*Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, Beeban Kidron, UK/USA 2004

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*Duo luo tian shi / Fallen Angels*, Wong Kar-Wai, HK 1995

*Fah talai jone / Tears of the Black Tiger*, Wisit Sasanatieng, 2000

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*Jao Nok Krajok / Mundane History*, Anocha Suwichakornpong, 2009

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*Krai thong*, Suthat Intaranupakorn, 2001

*Krasue*, Bin Bunluerit, 2002

*Kuen phra chan tem doueng / Isarn Special*, Mingmongkol Sonakul, 2002

*Kuen rai ngao / One Night Husband*, Pimpaka Towira, 2003

*Kunpan / Legend of the Warlord*, Tanit Jitnukul, 2002

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*Mae Nak*, Pimpaka Towira, 1998

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- Phra Apai Manee*, Chalart Sriwanna, 2003
- Phra Phuttajao / Life of the Buddha*, Wallapa Pimthong, 2007
- Phuean Sanit / Dear Dakanda*, Komgrit Triwimol, 2005
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- Rak Haeng Siam / The Love of Siam*, Chukiat Sakveerakul, 2007
- Ringu / The Ring*, Hideo Nakata, J 1998



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*Sawan sud uam / Happy Berry*, Thunskas Pansittivorakul, 2004

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*Smiles of the Fifth Night*, Sonthaya Subyen, 2005

*Sud Pralat / Tropical Malady*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004

*Sud Sakorn / The Adventures of Sud Sakorn*, Payud Ngaokrachang, 1979

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*Suriyothai*, Chatree Chalerm Yukol, 2001

*Tawipop / The Siam Renaissance*, Surapong Pinijkhar, 2004

*The Coffin*, Ekachai Uekrongtham, Singapore / South Korea / TH / USA 2008

*Titanic*, James Cameron, USA 1997

*The Beach*, Danny Boyle, USA/UK 2000

*The Eye / Khon hen phii / Gin Gwai*, Danny and Oxide Pang, HK/TH 2002

*The Eye 2 / Khon hen phii 2 / Gin gwai 2*, Danny and Oxide Pang, 2004

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*The Truth Be Told: The Cases Against Supinya Klangnarong*, Pimpaka Towira, 2007

*Goh Gayasit / Thirdworld*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 1998

*Three*, Peter Chan Kim Ji-Woon, Nonzee Nimibutr, HK / South Korea / TH 2002

*Tom Yam Goong*, Prachya Pinkaew, 2005

*Tone*, Piak Poster, 1970

*Tongpan*, Euthana Mukdasanit and Surachai Jantimatorn, 1977

*Wonderful Town*, Aditya Assarat, 2007

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